

Enlightened Woman Leaves Christianity Due to Jesus and the Apostles' Dehumanizing Language

Portland, Oregon – Emily Van Zant has been a churchgoer all her life, until now. She was born and raised attending church “any time the doors were open,” as she puts it. But recently, the more she reads the Bible, the more problems she has with the tone and rhetoric from some of Christianity’s key figures.

“I tried for a long time to ignore the angry and hostile language that many of the Apostles were spewing. My breaking point was when I realized that this problem originated with Jesus. I decided I could no longer align myself with such intolerant and dehumanizing language and ideology. All people are valuable and created with the spark of divinity. Calling them ‘a brood of vipers’ or ‘white-washed tombs’ was just a bridge too far for me. Shouldn’t we be showing love to everyone, not just those that agree with us?”

Ms. Van Zant joins a growing number of disillusioned ex-Christians who are looking to live out their faith in a more inclusive and tolerant manner. Ms. Van Zant continues:

“I was already struggling with Paul calling Jews “dogs” in Philippians 3:2. But when a good friend of mine pointed out that Jesus called a Canaanite woman a “dog” I knew this sort of intolerance and bigotry was something I could no longer condone. I embarked on a journey of reflection and fact-finding, and I realized this intolerance went deeper than just language. It was foundational to the entire Christian faith. Jesus’ entire ministry and message were built on non-

inclusivity, intolerance, and self-centeredness. He actually taught that he was the only way to heaven! The level of arrogance it takes to make that claim is mindboggling. That was his path, and I respect him for that, but you can't force your path on anyone else. You aren't allowed to tell other people that their path is wrong. That's not how this works. More and more people are seeing the truth and coming to the realization that the party is over for Jesus and his good time buddies of intolerance."

For the time being, Emily Van Zant is on her own path, seeking knowledge, wisdom, and faith in a number of religions and faiths.

"I will keep looking until I find something that works best for me. And once I do, I will be sure to tell everyone how intolerant and bigoted they are if they disagree with me."

You Don't Know Who Ty Cobb Was?

A baseball great. Record holder. In the first class of Hall of Fame players inducted in 1936. Lifetime batting average of .366 – the highest of all time. Three times batted over .400 for a season. Possibly the greatest player of the early 1900s.

Violent temper with a reputation for viciousness and thought to be a racist.

Some recent studies seem to indicate that some of the things thought to be true about him may not have been factual. (This may have been due to an inept and extremely biased biographer.)

Earlier biographers depicted Cobb as extremely violent, sharpening his spikes and endeavoring to slide into other players and cut them. He is said to have attacked blacks and sought to inflict bodily harm on them. Even Ken Burns of the famous video series *Baseball*, presented that picture of Ty Cobb. In the movie "Field of Dreams," the ghost player Shoeless Joe Jackson talks about not inviting Cobb to come to the magical field because "we hated the ____."

More recent studies seem to show that he was not hatefully racist, was respected by teammates and opponents alike and tried to graciously reach out to fans. He was, according to Charles Leershen, in "Ty Cobb: A Terrible Beauty," an extremely complex man, far from perfect, but not guilty of many of the things alleged in earlier biographies.

Ty Cobb was born in Georgia in 1886, just 21 years after the Civil War ended. He played for the Detroit Tigers, and because of his attitudes and actions, and being a Southerner, he may have created more problems for himself than he should have.

Interestingly enough, Jackie Robinson, who broke the color barrier in 1947, was also born in Georgia, 33 years after Ty Cobb. And recent information would seem to show that Cobb was not against African Americans playing in the major leagues. "The Negro should be accepted wholeheartedly, and not grudgingly," he said. "The Negro has the right to play professional baseball and whose [sic] to say he has not?" And he was proved correct in the years that followed as African Americans reshaped the all-time baseball statistics from that point forward.

Now while I am sure there are those who do, it is likely that most people in China, India, or the heart of Africa would not know who Ty Cobb really was; in fact, he or she would never have even heard of him. Fame is not only fleeting, it's also limited by time and place. In this case, the real and total truth about Tyrus Raymond Cobb is known only to God.

Historical facts, anecdotes, trivia and the like, are interesting, at least to some people, at certain times, and in at least a few places. They do serve as good attention grabbers, make for memorable illustrations, and help transition us to consider more important things. But only one bit of information and only one Individual makes any real difference.

It's not Ty Cobb who must be known – it's Jesus! Jesus, Name above all names. Jesus, who said of Himself "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no man cometh unto the father but by me." Jesus, supernatural birth, sinless life, sacrificial death, and glorious, bodily resurrection, all to save people from their sins. Jesus, of whom it was said: "Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is none other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved."

If Ty Cobb remains unknown except for a small group of baseball aficionados and historians, it will make virtually no difference. But if Jesus is not known – and received – there are eternal consequences. He tells us to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. His name is to be proclaimed in all the earth.

Last, but certainly not least: we must clearly and accurately communicate the message. If indeed historians have missed the boat on what kind of person Ty Cobb was – intentionally or accidentally – that is sad, to be sure. However to miss the message of Jesus, or to transmit or receive a distorted message, is tragic.

There are still hundreds of millions of people who are not only unreached with the gospel – the only message that can save them, remember – but are still unengaged in the sense that no believer or group of believers is plotting a strategy to engage them with the gospel. There remain some 1,600 languages and dialects that do not have even a portion of the Bible. Thankfully, major efforts are underway to change that

and get the Word to them in their tongue.

Ty Cobb was a great baseball player and a complicated person and while it is interesting to know who he really was and what he accomplished, that knowledge holds temporal importance. The same cannot be said about the most significant person to walk the face of the earth – Jesus Christ. We are to know Him and to make Him known to the uttermost ends of the earth. We should proclaim the Good News about Jesus with clarity, accuracy, and consistency. There is nothing more eternally significant than this.

5 Truths About the Diversity of the First Christmas

0 Christmas, do you ever remind us that people think their way of talking, writing, and celebrating is *the* way. Christmas starts quarrels over minutia more than all of the rest of the holidays combined. From what phrases to say to when to listen to music, we ironically turn this allegedly peaceful time of the year designed to put our focus on the birth of the most significant person ever into a self-aggrandizing time of opinions and disagreements. I realize many of these things are not meant to be taken too seriously (I honestly do not care if you consider *Die Hard* a Christmas movie) but if we are honest, we know that we get disproportionately passionate in defending some traditions.

If we study the first Christmas, we find that it was quite diverse. And I have no doubt an application to this is that we really need to realize that diversity matters to God. Much of (and dare I say most of) our way of “doing” Christmas are not

absolute truths to be followed and argued. And it may be that these silly differences of opinion about Christmas represent bigger and more serious issues we have with a lack of diversity in things things that do matter. Like worship and community life.

With that in mind, here are five things about the first Christmas and its diversity that can teach us to embrace the differences we have with others.

The worshippers were diverse

Mary was a young virgin. Joseph was a carpenter descended from King David. The Magi were astrologers and may have been kings. The first group of people commanded to go see Jesus were laity shepherds. Zechariah was a priest and his wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. Anna was a very elderly prophetess. Matthew, an author, was a Jewish tax collector. Luke was a Gentile doctor. The messengers from God to man about Jesus were angels and not even human. And I'd even include the animals as well, since their feeding trough is mentioned by name in the story.

The voices of Christmas are far more diverse than were are accustomed to in our lives. Perhaps Christmas should awaken us to this fact and motivate us to long to hear from a variety of sources on how to understand and serve Jesus. And it could be very edifying to worship with a diverse community and buck against the typical cultural model of a church filled with people as similar to me as possible.

The reactions were diverse

The Angels comforted Mary and the shepherds, both of whom were terrified. The shepherds told people about Jesus and glorified

God. Mary pondered the events deeply and treasured them in her heart. The magi bowed down to worship and brought gifts. Anna, Zechariah and Simeon gave prophecies. Simeon held Jesus in his arms. John the Baptist leaped in his mother's womb. Elizabeth gave a glad cry.

How we react to the Christmas season may seem so important to us that we expect others to feel similarly. When in fact there are many ways to react to Christmas and if they do not have anything to do with gift-giving or Santa or even huge family gatherings, they can still be good. As long as they are legitimate reactions to who Jesus is.

The geography was diverse

Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born. After his birth they went to Egypt for a while and then back to Nazareth where he was raised. The Magi were from "the East" and while it is impossible to say for sure where exactly that meant, it was a long distance from Galilee.

The lady who leads the prayer time at my church on Sunday mornings before Sunday school often brings requests from magazines that talk about places and people I have never heard of. I appreciate this instead of always just praying for our church, our neighborhood or our missionaries. God is indeed a God of the whole world and even Christmas reminds us of that.

The prophecies of Jesus as Savior were diverse

Jesus's name means "Jehovah is salvation" so centering the idea of Christmas around "Jesus is our Savior" is perfect. Yet even that phrase was broken down theologically that first Christmas. Consider just in Zechariah's song in Luke 1:67-80 that he teaches, among other things, that Jesus would be:

A Redeemer

This is a word that in and of itself has layers of meaning. A first century Jew who knew their Scriptures could think of Ruth, Job or even Levitical law and understand that Zechariah meant that God sent Jesus to rescue us from spiritual slavery and that in some way he was going to purchase us for God out of our pathetic circumstances. As a family-redeemer. This explains why Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6 that “you were bought at a price” and in Acts 20 he claimed the church was “purchased by the blood Christ”.

A Warrior King

The literal phrase Zechariah used was “horn of salvation” which is found in several places in his Scriptures to communicate victory over enemies and security and refuge. Combine this with the fact that Zechariah references David, the general king who led Israel to many war victories, some translations call Jesus “a mighty king” in this prophecy.

The Jesus of the Gospels did get angry and even violent (Mark 11) but he came to die and was a willing sacrifice who did not fight back against his human enemies. Yet to Zechariah’s audience, they knew that God was a Mighty Warrior King, as in Isaiah 42:13:

The Lord will go forth like a warrior,
He will arouse His zeal like a man of war.
He will utter a shout, yes, He will raise a war cry.
He will prevail against His enemies.

And then Revelation describes Jesus this way:

“And I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse, and He who sat on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and wages war. His name is The Word of

God. The armies which are in heaven were following Him on white horses. From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.”

We know from the New Testament that our enemies are not other humans. They are Satan, sin and death. And that Christ came to conquer them all. I think the resurrected Jesus is very much an image of the Old Testament Triumphant Warrior God and also of King David the War General, not victorious over the Philistines or Assyrians but over evil forces of darkness and over physical and spiritual death. And I think Zechariah prophesies this. The doctrine of the first Christmas goes much deeper than the incarnation and the image of baby Jesus.

Our covenant.

Zechariah referenced Abraham, which was the covenant he knew at the time, but we now know a covenant that is better and forever in Jesus Christ (Hebrews 9:15).

A light to all nations.

Darkness has a strong association with secrecy and wickedness and confusion. All of these things were true of most nations spiritually before Christ. But he came to bring knowledge of not mere morality but of salvation to God for everyone.

And there are more I could discuss. But what all of these phrases have in common is that they describe Jesus as Savior in terminology that demonstrates how profound, complex and marvelous that phrase is.

The object of worship was not diverse

And this is the most important thing of all. It is easy in our culture to bow down to diversity so far that we consider all beliefs and religions equal. And while I do not unnecessarily disrespect any belief or worldview, I without shame proclaim Jesus Christ as my Lord and God, the only means to get to God and the unique object of my worship. Christianity is exclusive by its nature because of Jesus, as any monolithic religion is and as all truth claims have to be in some sense. Christianity is significant not for how inclusive it is of all beliefs, but rather how distinct it is. It desires to be inclusive of all *people*, notably all types of people and the New Testament reiterates this over and over. Yet the way to Heaven is narrow. Jesus is the only door.

No matter your traditions this Christmas, the original story is exhaustively about Jesus and his role in human history. It wasn't just a birth. It was a collision of God and humanity that changed everything that matters in eternity.

As always, we welcome feedback in the comment section below.

Truth as White as Snow

While baby Jesus might have looked and acted like other human babies, He was more than just a human baby. He was God Himself. God the Father had sent Jesus, God the Son, not to do away with everything He said in the Old Testament, but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). In other words, He came to be the

physical representation and embodiment of God's Word (John 1). He is and was the Word, the Truth of God.

What is Truth?

Truth. We know that Jesus embodied it but what exactly is it? Let's look at it a bit, shall we? Truth is simple and complicated at the same time. Many things are true: Snow is white, trees are wooden, and stars twinkle, to name a few. Every true thing on earth involves finiteness, things that will fail at some point no matter what. But the truth, the truth of God's word, is an infinite truth. It always has been and always will be. When people fail to find the truth that never fails, it is no wonder they get disillusioned with life. The story of Pontius Pilate is a perfect example of that. The biblically recorded encounter between Jesus and Pilate took place in either A.D. 30 or 33. In particular, among the Gospel accounts, the book of John provides some interesting details about the conversation between Pilate and Jesus. If you read between the lines, the conversation reveals that Pilate was tense and a bit disillusioned at the time. This disillusionment is highlighted by the last exchange. Here it is in all of its glory:

"Pilate, therefore, said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest I am the king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth, Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice.

Pilate saith unto him, What is truth?"

That was the very last thing he said to Jesus. It was obviously a rhetorical question. This was a question that he didn't really think there was a good answer too. It also highlights his disillusionment and stress. It is easy to see why if you look at his political standing. Let's start with the current Roman Emperor of that time: Tiberius. Tiberius

became the emperor of the Roman Empire in 14 A.D. In 26 A.D. he temporarily semi-retired to an island named Capri, leaving a man named Sejanus as his co-regent in charge of controlling the affairs of Rome in his absence. Sejanus instituted an anti-Semitism rule and Pilate, his appointee to Judea, carried it out. And as prefect of Judea he was positioned to do so.

But Sejanus' run as the top dog came to a hard end. In 31 A.D., two years prior to Jesus' trial, Sejanus was executed for attempting to seize complete power. For the next two years, a witch hunt of sorts went down in which all who might have been his co-conspirator were sought for execution. Pilate would have been in a very tenuous position at this point and would not have wanted to do anything politically that would stir the already troubled waters.

In addition, Tiberius' was already on the alert where Israel was concerned. He had realized the falsehood of many of Sejanus' claims against the Jews and therefore ordered that their persecution cease.

Poor Pilate. Poor confused, disillusioned, Pilate. That which he had considered truth was either dead or dying. And so, disgruntled, Pilate had asked Jesus, "What is truth?"

The search for truth has become a self-centered pastime. Many people are looking for the comfortable, most desirable thing to be "truth" for them. Whatever is personally most desirable is true to many.

So what exactly is truth? Many non-Christians will say that truth is whatever one thinks it is, that it's completely subjective and different from person to person (relativism). Some of them will say that all is truth, that nothing is untrue. In other words, truth is found inside ourselves and we can only rely on ourselves for the truth while at the same time accepting as equally valid the beliefs of others.

Believing the Truest Truth in the Universe

Our believing or not believing in something does not make it either true or not true. It is still either one of these things no matter what. But it is still important that we do believe in the truth, particularly the truth of Jesus Christ. It is crucial that we recognize that He is the Truth, the most important truth in the universe.

When we say believing in and on the Truth of Jesus, it needs to be more than just a casual acceptance of the fact of Him. And it is a belief that needs to equate to a full, 100% acceptance in every situation for the rest of your life. This is not like saying you kind of believe something, but admitting that you don't really know if it's true or not. The Truth of Jesus demands that our belief takes the opposite extreme, that we know that He is the truth as surely as we know that snow is white.

The Truth of Jesus is infinitely important because it is an eternally saving truth. Those who have not heard and accepted the Truth, aren't entirely reliable sources. They might be smart people as far as worldly matters, but not having the one Truth with them is a pretty big deal. Pilate's problem was that he looked for truth in the form of Sejanus, a guy who was all able ambition and power. When this false truth failed, Pilate despaired of any truth at all. What a pity that he didn't listen more closely to Jesus, God incarnate.

In the preceding verse, Christ had told him that He had come into the world to tell the truth, that all who heard Him heard the truth. Pilate clearly didn't follow up his rhetorical question with any investigation into the matter, because he apparently ended things without any hope. Three years later Pilate was relieved of his position. Tradition says that shortly after returning to Rome he killed himself.

Christianity was not founded by a fallen man but by Jesus the God-Man, the God who existed before the beginning, the God who

created all mankind and all the universe. This is the Truth that came to earth on that night over 2000 years ago.

(Editor's Note: A version of this article originally appeared in Spring 2007 issue of Clear Living for [Randall House Publications](#).)

Why I Still Say “Ask Jesus Into Your Heart” and other similar phrases

“The hardest thing to achieve in the Christian life is balance.”

So says my mentor, David Potete. I open with this because I am often very critical of how Christians take complex theology and boil it down to simple platitudes. Yet I also believe Christians have a tendency to be a tad overly critical at times. So for the sake of keeping my personal pendulum from swinging too far in the critical category I am going to defend some oft-critiqued Christian cliches.

Disclaimer, up front: Any time you quote someone, as I do below in reference to these popular American church phrases, you risk misrepresenting what they say. I have attempted to avoid that by trying to understand the speakers in context. I then find that I do not disagree with the person to any significant level. The only reason I am addressing this is because famous people get quotes attributed to them and those doing the attributing often do not see the issue with as much

nuance and balance as the original author.

I aim to help us communicate God's truth as accurately and humbly as possible. So with that in mind, here are three phrases that have come under fire in mainstream Christianity the last few years that I have no problem saying when I preach.

"Asking Jesus into your heart"

Paul Washer: "Then they ask, 'Do you want Jesus to come into your heart?' Does it bother anyone that this formula or language is not found in the New Testament?"

Behind Tony Evans, Washer is probably my favorite famous preacher. I respect his desire to provide searing rebuke to terrible theology. As I have listened to him explain the quote above, I am positive that his biggest issue is that we teach people to pray a superficial prayer as fire insurance against living like a pagan. As he says, we make the decision to follow Christ a flu shot, when in reality it is a lifelong commitment to the Lord of the Universe.

So why do I bring it up? Because people may think that we should eliminate the expression "asking Jesus into your heart" from our vernacular completely, which I would not agree with. Perhaps Washer would advocate for a complete whitewashing of the phrase, but I am not going to put those words in his mouth.

The reason I am not going to stop saying it is because it truly is not unbiblical. The idea of Christ being in our hearts is stated plainly in verses like Ephesians 3:17 and strongly implied in verses like 2 Corinthians 4:6 and 2 Peter 1:19. And as long as a phrase is biblical in some sense, I would be very slow to denounce it[2]. Having said that, there are cases where even true Christian cliches can do more harm

than good, as when a person is grieving.].

However, I add that it can be dangerous to present a sinner's prayer or a phrase like "ask Jesus into your heart" without other soteriology supporting it. Frankly, the Bible gives a variety of seemingly conflicting ways that a person becomes a Christian: by grace through faith, by confessing Jesus as Lord, by repentance, by taking up your cross, by believing the resurrection, etc[2. For a thorough investigation into resolving the tension between all of these phrases, I recommend *Discipleship: The Expression of Saving Faith* by Dr. Robert Picirilli.]. As a pastor I have the advantage of preaching to the same people every week and therefore some weeks I focus on some phrases and other weeks I focus on others. Too much focus on any of them can lead to bad theology at worst or confusion at best. So if one week I focus on the point of decision and praying for forgiveness, the next time I may focus on denying yourself.

As a result, I have no issue using the phrase "Ask Jesus into your heart."

"Accepting Jesus"

David Platt: "Should it not concern us that the Bible never uses the phrase 'accept Jesus into your heart'?"

This is extremely similar to the one above. I respect David Platt about as much as I can and I marvel at how he speaks so boldly and humbly at the same time. In trying to understand him in context I feel similarly as with Washer; he's not complaining as much about the phrase as the philosophy of easy-decision salvation that produces no fruit.

He is even more nuanced than Washer in how he explains that the Bible does have allusions to phrases like "Jesus coming in our hearts" so it is not the exact phraseology as much as that

there are more biblical phrases we can use for salvation.

He may be right about that, but in regards to the idea of “accepting” Christ, Jesus used that verb in his parable of the sower so I am not ready to take the verb “accept” totally out of my Gospel presentations. Again, as long as I explain it with other biblical verbs like “repent” and “believe” if I can. In the rare cases where I cannot, I find comfort in the range of Paul’s explanations of salvation in Acts and that the Holy Spirit can compensate for my limitations. I have no doubt the jailer could have been saved in Acts 16 even if Paul didn’t tell him to count the cost of following Jesus.

“Christianity isn’t a religion, it’s a relationship”

Matt Walsh: “The phrase ‘it’s a relationship, not a religion’ is almost always used by people who want Christianity without any of the moral duties.”

In fairness, many Christians I know have not gone as far as this but instead have found balance in saying that Christianity is a relationship *and* a religion. I think that is much wiser, and true, yet I still have no issue at times saying the phrase as I wrote it above.

The reason is that to my audience, often people need to be absolutely clear that Christianity is not rules, rituals or works. Chicago is modern day Athens in how religiously pluralistic it is. And I have reached the conclusion that it is much more likely that people in my neighborhood needs to understand the covenantal basis to salvation in Christianity before they understand what God expects of them. They need to understand that people enter into relationship with God by grace. Some people have so much religious baggage coming in that they need to hear grace preached dozens or even hundreds of times to grasp it.

But I adapt if the situation demands it. If I am talking to a 60-year old Muslim, I am very inclined to say “It’s not a religion” but if I am talking to a 19-year old young woman who has been told her whole life that Jesus should be her boyfriend, then I’ll probably describe it as a religion. We can err when we approach everyone with the same method.

Some people quote James 1:27 to me and to that I say that the word James used it is not quite like what many people within my reach think of when they hear “religion.” The word James used can easily be translated “devotion,” which we understand relationally and that is different than “Do X and X or you will not reach God.” I have heard adherents of other religions say that they never know if they have done enough to merit God’s approval and that is so utterly opposite Biblical Christianity that they desperately need to know the difference. And while I will eventually speak to what it means to be devoted to God so that I feed orphan and widows and avoid worldly pollution, I have no issue saying “Christianity isn’t a religion, it’s a relationship” in a sermon.

What do you think? We encourage thoughtful feedback below.

What About Those Who’ve Never Heard of Jesus?

“You’re in some remote part of the earth and you never heard the name of Jesus, you cannot get to Heaven, you think?”
[Oprah Winfrey]

According to the Joshua Project, there are about 3,000 people groups in the world that have essentially zero Christian contact. It is nearly impossible to determine the exact number, but based on this we can safely assume there are millions, and perhaps billions, of people who have never heard the name of Jesus.

When you juxtapose this with what the Bible teaches about how a person is saved from eternal damnation, it can cause cognitive dissonance to the Christian mind.

And trying to reconcile basic New Testament theology with the practical reality of where the Gospel hasn't been preached makes for intense discussion and debate. The quote from Oprah above happened [during her former show in a lively conversation between her, her guest speaker and a woman in the audience](#). Oprah presents a "fair" view of those who've never heard, that God cares more about their heart than if they've heard of Jesus. This is a popular view, even within the evangelical church. But is it correct?

I want to tackle this issue, but not in a "Here is the final and authoritative answer to problem" way. The Bible speaks to this, but not in an expositional manner. In other words, I can't give you an interpretation of one passage that clears it all up.

No, I think this mystery is better viewed as a puzzle of about ten pieces that have to be seen together in order to see a more complete image. Yet even with the truths I present below, I am still not advocating an answer that ends the discussion. This issue is far too complex. But these truths do help me relieve the dissonance to a great level and help start the discussion. They may leave you with more questions than answers. That will not offend me. I hope it encourages you to add to the dialogue.

But to at least get it started, I offer these as things that I

am absolutely convinced the Bible teaches. If I can't have a final authoritative answer to this issue, I can at least focus on things that are clear and go from there. Here are the ten:

1. Jesus is the only way to God (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

2. Those who do not follow Jesus end up in Hell (John 3:36).

These two are the basis for why the question of "What about those who've never heard?" exists. Without them there is no issue.

3. God is just (Deuteronomy 4:32; Romans 3:5b-6).

Whatever the answer to the question is, I think we have to believe that God is fair. This matters because the issue at its heart is that it is unfair to condemn someone for knowledge they do not have. But the Bible describes God as a just judge.

4. God is not far from anyone (Acts 17:26-27).

This matters because with this topic it appears we are dealing with people who are far from the truth about God, when in reality no one is actually far from God. Note that Paul in these verses is dealing precisely with where people live geographically.

5. God can be known through the created world so men are without excuse (Romans 1:18-20).

Even without the Bible and a Christian witness, every person that lives now is accountable to God in some sense because they can see him through creation.

6. God can be known from human morality (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 2:14-15).

Similarly, because we know right from wrong and that a general sense of justice transcends culture and time, we know there

has to be a standard of right and wrong we are all accountable to. We know there is a God because His law is ingrained within us.

7. God desires that everyone be saved (2 Peter 3:9).

8. God demands repentance from everyone to be saved (Acts 17:30).

These two are crucial because the first one teaches us about God's heart on this issue and the second, at least in theory, eliminates exceptions. Like those who've never heard. If there is an exception there better be a clear explanation in the Bible.[1. A shout out here to the students at a leadership conference I helped lead in 2014 for asking tough questions in a Q&A after this presentation. This event caused me to add an addendum, footnoted here, to this presentation on the concept of an age of accountability. Logically it is hard to believe God demands repentance from a 3-month old baby. Biblically, we can see in Isaiah God acknowledging that a particular child is not old enough to know right from wrong; we see Nathan telling David he will see his deceased newborn in Heaven one day and that Jesus loved children with qualification. Does this mean, biblically, that there is an age of accountability? I am not 100% convinced this is so. Yet I believe it has to exist for God to be fair. This opens up a can of worms of course about what the age is and I only bring it up here because if it exists, I would guess it is at least possible that children are accountable at a younger age in a culture where they hear the Gospel more often than in a place where Jesus' name is never even spoken.]

9. God can get a missionary to a searching person (Acts 10:1-48).

If a person is living a God-fearing life with no knowledge of Jesus, God can get a missionary to them. It is true that sometimes people groups do not have missionaries because

people do not go, but sometimes they do not because they are hostile to Christianity.

10. God can reveal himself in dreams to lost people (Genesis 41; Daniel 2).

This is huge, especially in the Muslim world. There are many stories I encourage you to read about it if you have not. You can begin [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

So again, without presuming that these ten things tie the issue into a nice little bow, I present them as giving us at least a picture of how we can begin reconciling the tensions of God's fairness, the necessity of confessing Christ, and the lack of Gospel witness in thousands of people groups. I doubt I will ever feel completely confident in any answer to the question and I confess we may be asking the wrong question here. But at least it catapults us to search the Scriptures to learn more about who God is and what he is like, and fosters discussion on a complex topic that exercises the mind. That is rarely a bad thing.

A Panamanian Perspective on Holy Week

Since I spent nearly 30 years in Panama as a missionary, I have a perspective on Easter that I trust has taught me some valuable lessons.

First off, Holy Week in the early years (1970s-1980s) tended to be influenced by Roman Catholicism, the predominant religion in Panama. The entire week was somewhat subdued, with less emphasis on the commercial aspects of life. Good Friday was somber and solemn; television and radio stations could only play, funeral-like music, dirges, and the like. Churches had mass to commemorate the passion. There were no sports or entertainment. (After those early years, Good Friday became more "secular," and has remained so. It is possible that some radio stations may have special solemn programming, but not the TV stations, by and large. Some of the older people, staunchly Catholic, complained, but basically the day has become a "holiday," not a "holy day.")

Strangely enough, Easter Sunday was pretty much business as usual. Though it was called "Domingo de Gloria," (Sunday of Glory), there didn't seem to be a lot of celebration of Christ's resurrection, and folks went to the beach, had picnics, visited family, etc., pretty much like any other time when they were off work. But neither the solemnity or the frivolity seemed to touch people very deeply. The solemnity didn't cause people to come to Christ for forgiveness of sin, and receive a Savior who would change their lives. The frivolity wasn't Christian joy, based on the the certainty of the Risen Lord who had conquered death.

What a difference I discovered in the evangelical church! For one thing, many churches had a special Good Friday service which featured the seven last words of Christ he uttered from the cross. I took part in many of those over the years, sometimes preaching just one of the seven words, as in a joint service, and sometimes all seven. It could make for a very long service, but focusing from a theological as well as a practical perspective was helpful and challenging.

We sang songs (in Spanish) like "There is a Fountain," and "Nothing But the Blood." We also sang songs about the passion such as "Oh Qué Amor," (Oh What Love), and "¿Sabes qué Murió

Jesús?” (Do you Know that Jesus Died?”) this last one sung to the tune of the 1960s pop song “Sealed With a Kiss.” Beautiful, melodic songs about our Savior’s death on the cross that really touched my heart, but unknown to English-only speaking people.

Easter Sunday was always a special day in Panama. We’d sing, in Spanish of course, songs like “Low in the Grave He Lay” with volume and emotion, and hear the resurrection message delivered on that day of days.

We introduced to the church in Bethania, where we served for about 15 years, the “Sunrise Service” concept. I think some other churches already were doing it, but it was new to many of the people we’d seen come to Christ, and over time came to be one of the most popular and inspiring things we did each year. An early service, often around 5:30 or 6:00 a.m., followed by a breakfast fellowship meal, and then Sunday School, made for a glorious day in the Lord, and with His people.

I remember our first Easter in Panama, in 1978, when we met at the church on a Sunday night. It would have been March 26. Our main service was held on Sunday night at the beginning of the church plant. We sang. We prayed. I preached. At the end of the service a young man in his early 20s came forward to receive Christ. His words to me were these: “I knew there had to be more in life than what I had found, and tonight I found it in Jesus Christ.” Christ arose! He lives! He is risen. He is risen indeed!

Five Movie Resurrections and Why They Matter

In honor of Easter and our celebration of the resurrection, I have decided to compile five of my favorite film resurrections. Now, some of you more pious and holy readers might be shaking your heads right now wondering if you should continue reading this, with its borderline-sacrilegious-sounding premise. I assure you, no sacrilege or disrespect is intended. I just happen to be a huge movie fan and I believe strongly in the concept of art imitating life. Or in this case, art imitating death-then-life. I am convinced that resurrection, in a variety of forms, is a powerful storytelling device, primarily since it is grounded in the truth of the greatest story ever told. This will not be an in-depth exploration of these films. There is simply too much ground to cover. I do reserve the right to revisit these films down the road with a more thorough examination. With that in mind, here are five of my favorite movie resurrections. Warning: Many spoilers ahead. You have been warned.

Gandalf (The Lord of the Rings)



Tolkien scattered Christ figures throughout his most popular work, with Gandalf being one of the most obvious and powerful. Director Peter Jackson, though not sharing Tolkien's faith,

fully embraced many of these allusions and in some ways, upped the ante. When Gandalf falls to the Balrog in the Mines of Moria, in the first film in the trilogy, he “dies” with his arms extended in cruciform. He gives his life to save the fellowship. When he returns in The Two Towers, he returns transfigured. He descended into the bowels of death and is raised up again in power and glory.

E.T. (E.T. The Extraterrestrial)

Everyone knows about E.T. If you don't, stop reading this and go watch it right now. It is one of the greatest films ever made and you are less of a person if you have not watched it. The film includes one of the best Christophanies, which is ironic considering it was directed by a Jewish man who had no intention of making that connection. E.T. dies, comes back to life, performs miracles, and ascends to the heavens by films end. Awesome stuff which is only helped by the incredible John Williams's score.

Neo (The Matrix)



Whoa! I realize that the religious symbols, words, and imagery that are liberally sprinkled throughout the film were included not out of any devotion to the truth, but more in an effort to tie the film to older and deeper archetypes. For the most

part, it is effective. The final scenes in the film step into the eternal conversation about death and rebirth and while the filmmakers divorce their exploration of these things from Christian ideals like selflessness and sacrifice, they do touch upon the concept of Messianic necessity.

Truman (The Truman Show)



At some point, I am going to do a deep dive into the spiritual and social truths layered into this film, but for now, we will just hit some highlights. The Truman Show is the story of one man – Truman Burbank – who lives a false life. He doesn't realize his life is fake, but everyone around him does. He is the unwitting star of a television show that has followed his every move since the day he was born. His entire world is fake; the makers of the show even construct a city-sized studio to preserve the illusion. Late in the film, once Truman has discovered that things are not what they appear, he is confronted by Christof, the creator of the show. Christof summons a storm to destroy Truman's boat, leaving Truman tangled in ropes and unconscious under water. For the lack of a better word, Truman dies. Then he rises from the dead. Truman continues his attempt to escape, using the still

floating boat and Christof, in a final, desperate attempt, uses the studio's sound system to speak to Truman. He is the very voice of the god of this fake and empty world. He tries to convince Truman to stay. Every plea and bargain rings hollow and Truman remains steadfast in his desire to leave. There is imagery throughout the final moment of the film that are clearly signposts to the crucifixion, Jesus, and the empty tomb. Combined with the thematic ingenuity of the film, the ending makes for a powerful and satisfying resolution.

Thor

Scoff if you want, but in my mind, there are few films that incorporate the ideas of self sacrifice and resurrection better than Marvel's Thor. Without getting too specific, Thor, the god of Thunder, goes through a massive character transformation; going from arrogant and foolish to noble and selfless during the course of the film. The emotional climax of the film occurs when Thor offers his life to save his friends. He is rewarded with death and then a return to life in a powerful and triumphant bit of cinematic magic. In the clip below, the elements that truly sell the moment are the amazing score by Patrick Doyle and the radiant smile on Lady Sif's face when she realizes that her friend is not dead.

So there you have it. Those are a few of my favorites. I would love to hear your thoughts on them. Or, you can tell us about some other resurrections in popular culture that mean a lot to you.

The Tick Tock

A little away
the clock tick tocks
the time where
we know He knows
it tick tocks
the clock rocks

away
when all was lost
He left the stars
where love is lush to
touch our hands,
our heads, our souls,

standing
in His thunder
underneath in
the nothingness
of our ticking,
in the sea of our tocking,
in the ticking, the tocking,

away
when life was lost
and deliverance
crossed into our
land where love is losing,
where He touches our hands, our heads, our souls,
where He views this sphere so

away
ticking, tocking,
our sides
plumped with bumps
and clumps and thorny lumps

far away
from His sigh
of mercy,
of death, His death,
of life, His life,
of the tick tock
the clock rocks
today.

Easter Refocused

In his latest book, *If You Can Keep It: The Forgotten Promise of American Liberty*, Eric Metaxas recounts a story of his family's Greek Orthodox tradition of welcoming Easter morning with a ceremony of darkness, light, candles, and expectation. Reading his description moved me. It is not a tradition that I am familiar with, but its truth speaks in a language I have understood since I was a child. It is a beautiful, poetic ritual pointing to the Great Light that rose from the dead on that first Easter morning.

Next Saturday, my church will celebrate Easter by hosting an egg hunt, games, free food, and a brief explanation to our visitors as to why we gather on a weekend morning to do all those things. The Gospel will be shared that morning, hopefully with many who have never accepted Easter as anything more than bunny rabbits, eggs, and food. We will do our part that morning to provide a glimpse of the true story at the center of the Easter celebration.

Family traditions. Egg hunts. Rituals. Good Friday services. Easter lunches. Sunrise services. These things, a blend of sacred and secular, make up a good deal of how most of us will

spend Easter weekend. The holy, Scripture-inspired traditions will walk hand in hand with the earthy, silly, and seemingly insignificant. What value do these traditions and customs and rituals possess? Should egg hunts and sunrise services coexist on a church calendar? Should Easter lunches and Good Friday communion cohabitate in the lives of believers? Yes and no. Or perhaps better said, yes, in the right manner. While the church's easy absorption of mostly harmless, yet potentially distracting activities has ever been a point of contention and conversation, I do believe that there is a messy beauty to our uniquely American Easter celebrations. But it is a beauty that needs to be examined and evaluated, never leaving things to chance and the whims of the culture at large.

Our view of Easter...

I would guess, that to most of our country, Easter is all about egg hunts, candy, chocolate, the Easter Bunny, and food. Lots of food. While most Americans would recognize the true "reason for the season" it is not a part of their lives in any significant way. The crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus is at best an afterthought. And at worst, a sanctimonious intrusion into their lives. And while most of us that are regular church goers claim to embrace the deeper meaning of Easter, our actions, activities, and traditions do little to support that claim. This is not a self-righteous judgment on my part. I am guilty of this as well, and have been for too long. Easter is the moment our faith became reality. Easter celebrates the singular event that remade the world, tearing the veil between God and man, yet I am more excited about what food we will be eating on Sunday afternoon. I look forward to my church's egg hunt more than I do the Good Friday service the night before. And I am convinced that I am not alone in this. We have allowed these little side items to overwhelm the meal. The main dish sits there, virtually uneaten because we have become so consumed with the sugary sweets and delectable treats heaped on our

plates. If Easter is ever to rise to prominence again, in our lives or the life of our nation, we have work to do.

A few suggestions...

Everything we do, whether it be during Easter, Christmas, or any other holy celebration, should point to Christ. I realize that is basic stuff. I'm not breaking any ground here. This has been said, and said better, by many before me. It will be said, and said better, by many after me. But the point stands: the church has lost the primacy of Easter because we stopped focusing on Christ. Or better said: Our view of Easter has been diminished because we stopped using everything at our disposal to point to the empty tomb.

I hope this doesn't come across as some crass attempt to use the name of Jesus to make things more "Christian." I have never been a fan of slapping Jesus on things to make them more holy or spiritual. It cheapens His name and turns it into a good luck charm or talisman. In our effort to be approachable, we've made "Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." our defining attribute. It's our unspoken battle cry. The problem is, if we rarely use words, we might miss some perfect opportunities to actually share the Gospel. I'm not knocking that phrase or the truth behind it. Our lives should be a living, breathing restatement of the Gospel to everyone we encounter. There are times, though, that we are served up divine opportunities to say the words that can save, and we don't because we are afraid of coming across as pushy. Or we don't want our friends and neighbors that come to our Easter egg hunt to feel like we tricked them. Sorry, that's not good enough. One should never apologize for sharing the Good News.

In your homes, share the Gospel. Teach the truth of the old, old story when you hunt for eggs or when you eat ham, potatoes, casseroles, and pies. Don't assume the value and importance of Easter is clear to your family. Make the day

about Jesus and His resurrection. Make it about your salvation through His sacrifice. Talk about it. Don't leave the truth unspoken. Speak it loud and often.

In your church, if you have visitors on your campus, many who are probably un-churched and unsaved, please, please share the Gospel with words. Don't be afraid of being perceived as pushy. Don't be afraid of poor reactions. The Gospel is a folly to those who are perishing. Share the truth with grace and love, but share it with words and clarity. There will be some that need to hear it that very day. Don't miss that because you want to be more approachable or non-threatening.

In your day-to-day, focus on Christ and prepare your heart for Easter. There is no greater intrusion of the fallen world than the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Jehovah God reached down into the natural order of things, and He broke it. He ripped it apart. He sacrificed His Son on the altar of humanity's sin. He plunged His Son into the earth and into the Fall's reward. Three days later, He reached through rock and stone, sin and shame, Hell and judgment, and shattered the unbreakable wall of separation. The earth cried out in thanksgiving. The angels lifted their voices in incomparable praise. Jesus, the very Son of God, had subjugated death and the grave. And now we, the very root and cause of our suffering, the very reason for death's primacy, the very source of the impenetrable wall, we can raise our hands in thankful praise and cry out, "O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory? But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

That's it. That's the whole thing. What it's all about. Don't lose sight of that because you are distracted by eggs, food, candlelight vigils and the rest. Let us keep our eyes on Jesus and make Him the primary focus this Easter.

