

Finding Our Way Back to the Good News

*resurrecting*  
**religion**

*greg paul*

I have a growing suspicion that the antireligious sentiment, which is so pervasive in Western culture and is captured by the mantra, “I’m not religious, but I’m spiritual,” is simply the latest version of that old enemy and heresy, Gnosticism. It’s like saying, “I love football; I’m just not into the organized kind.” Unless our faith is rooted in and structured around practices and pathways that have stood the test of time—unless it is, in some real and deep sense, *religious*—it will not hold together. Indeed, the root of the word *religion* is exactly that: to *re-ligament*, to tie broken things back together. Greg Paul’s book *Resurrecting Religion* comes just in the nick of time. Greg—who claims to be neither theologian nor writer, but who does both these things brilliantly—speaks winsomely, urgently, convincingly about our need to reclaim our religious identity and heritage, while also doing what Jesus and the prophets did: rejecting all bad religion. This is a book for our times if ever there were one.

**MARK BUCHANAN**

Author of *Your Church Is Too Safe*

In this book, Greg Paul speaks an urgently contemporary word about the church. He knows about the church. He knows its faults: excessive accommodation to culture, privatism that is mostly irrelevant, and intellectual schemes remote from reality. But he also knows better than that. His pages teem with testimony about “the other shoe” of gospel obedience that lives in the real world, that moves

## RESURRECTING RELIGION

in ways of mercy, compassion, and justice, and that heals and transforms. Paul is a story teller; he has rich, concrete, compelling tales about real people living out gospel lives. His book is a treasure house of evidence that there is a way that need not yield to “bad religion.” We will not want to miss out on this rich testimony!

**WALTER BRUEGGEMANN**

Columbia Theological Seminary

It’s easy to criticize religion. It’s an entirely different thing to offer thought-provoking insights of your own religious practice from the trenches. Deep inside the muck and mire of human existence is where the gospel first gave light and the religious impulse was born anew—one that would care for widows and orphans in their distress and spark a living faith in a living God. Greg Paul lights up the dark realities of our post-religious talk with the hope of a religion that matters in real life to real people, right now.

**DANIELLE STRICKLAND**

Author of *The Ultimate Exodus*

Greg Paul’s central premise, that *true religion* is vital for the life and salvation of the world, is backed by an experiential authority that is uncomfortably hard to dismiss. Particularly, reading the book of James through the lens of the Beatitudes is a lesson I’ll not soon forget. This is a timely and important book.

**STEVE BELL**

Singer, songwriter

“True religion,” writes Greg Paul, “is to faith what voice is to a thought. It puts flesh on the bones of faith.” This book describes the gritty intersection between incarnational theology and integrated spirituality. With raw vulnerability and buckets full of hope, Greg Paul will restore your faith in the church.

**STEVE WIENS**

Senior pastor of Genesis Covenant Church, author  
of *Beginnings* and *Whole*

I highly recommend that you read *Resurrecting Religion* for these reasons: stories that will move and inspire you; insight that is wise and practical; writing that is vivid and lucid; a guide (Greg) whom you’ll enjoy spending time with and who has lived this story with integrity and by grace; and, finally, because this book will give you a vision for more faithfully loving your neighbors in response to our common prayer that God’s Kingdom will come on earth as in heaven.

**KENT ANNAN**

Author of *Slow Kingdom Coming*

*Resurrecting Religion* will inspire you to live out the biblical call to justice and Jesus’ teachings from the Sermon on the Mount. In a world that continues to create distance between the rich and poor, Greg’s book teaches us the importance and power of having close relationships with those living on the margins of society.

**AARON GRAHAM**

Lead pastor, The District Church



*resurrecting*

# religion

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# introduction

**SOME TIME AGO** I attended a conference hosted by an organization whose primary focus is church planting. Most of the three hundred or so attendees were church planters, domestic missionaries, pastors, or people otherwise engaged in full-time mission work.

I had been invited as one of three plenary speakers. I was slated to speak to the whole gathering and to lead two seminar sessions. Writing books and speaking are not my primary gigs—what I write and talk about grows out of my day-to-day commitment to be present and participate in the Sanctuary community, as both member and pastor. Because our community holds, at its center, people who are poor, homeless, street involved, addicted, mentally ill, and in one way or another rejected by society, it is a demanding yet strangely fulfilling place to be. And consequently, I don't tend to hang around much when I have a speaking engagement. I do what I've been invited to do, then go home, where my real life is unfolding.

On this occasion, though, I came early for the express

purpose of listening to one of the other plenary speakers, whom I had never heard before. He's well known as a terrific communicator and Bible teacher. The teaching pastor of a large church, he was addressing this particular group for the first time, and he'd been asked (I think) to outline a basic theology of the gospel.

The morning started, as such events usually do, with a welcome, announcements, and then some music. Later, there would be a band, but perhaps in deference to the earliness of the hour, one talented young guy with a guitar led us through thoughtfully chosen worship songs. Scripture was read, the needs of some individuals and some challenging international situations were mentioned, and we prayed together about them.

Then the speaker got up to do his thing. He came as advertised: intelligent, articulate, witty, engaging—all of that. He spoke, it was obvious, from a deep and thoughtful conviction. The audience enjoyed him immensely.

The centerpiece of his theology of the gospel was this: *Jesus came to abolish religion*. If I'm not mistaken, he'd written a book about it. Jesus good; religion bad.

I looked around. Many heads were bobbing in assent, and there was much smiling and some occasional laughter. The speaker's audience was right there with him. I thought about who the audience members were—good people who had committed their lives to living out the gospel—and I thought about why they were there. They certainly weren't in it for the money! I reflected on what we had been doing through the course of the morning so far: catching up with one another

over coffee and muffins in the foyer; gathering in a church auditorium; communally worshipping, reading Scripture, and praying; and listening to a gifted person exposit the gospel.

And I wondered, *What is it we think we're doing here? Isn't all this, um, religion? Wouldn't anybody else say this is religious activity? Simply saying that we're not religious doesn't make it so. Are we fooling ourselves?*

And I found myself asking, *What do we mean by "religion," then? And what about it scares us so much?*

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It seems to me that what critics of religion—believers and nonbelievers alike—generally mean by *religion* is “all the bad, crazy, or self-important things people do in the name of God.” Hypocrisy, materialism, exclusivity, judgmental attitudes, seeking or abusing power—along with the blind and dangerous arrogance that comes from believing that “God is on our side.” Those attitudes and actions *are* wrongheaded and even hateful.

But is that all religion means? Didn't Jesus say that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it?<sup>1</sup> Wouldn't we have to admit that the law of Moses was religious? Didn't Jesus tell his disciples, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments”?<sup>2</sup> Sure, that's relationship, but isn't it also religion—actually doing what our Master asks?

Much Christian activity really is contrary to what Jesus taught. Just picking at random, let's say, supporting wars and building big, expensive edifices that serve nobody but

once-a-week attendees, while children in the same city go hungry. Based on the general divergence between what our Master taught and what we often do, I would imagine that adherents of other religions routinely ignore the tenets of their faiths too.

But not all religious activity is contrary to what Jesus taught. “Religion” *does*, for instance, feed the poor. At Sanctuary—the faith community in Toronto that is my home—about twenty-five thousand meals each year are shared by a handful of people who are wealthy (relatively speaking) and a large group who are poor. Churches, missions, synagogues, mosques, and temples across our city do the same, and I know that such material care is similarly offered by faith-based groups all around the world to people who are poor. In fact, the biggest provider of support to people living in poverty, after government, is the church. Isn’t that religion too?

When Christians rush to the scene of the latest world disaster with money, food, medical help, and other resources—people acting out publicly and communally what they believe privately and individually—isn’t that religion?

If we deny religion, are we denying the good stuff as well as the bad? Are we, perhaps, giving ourselves permission to believe but not do much about what we believe?

Despite all its (deserved) bad press, when the church acts like the body of Christ (as it’s supposed to), it does some really good stuff. My own thoughts about the matter have not been shaped in a vacuum—or at theological or church-planting conferences, which can sometimes be dangerously close to the same thing. Lived experience among the people of Sanctuary,

and the long years of reflection that have accompanied that experience, has continually challenged and refined my paradigm, forcing me over and over to abandon my assumptions and forge new ways of thinking and doing. Throughout this book, stories from that crazy, dysfunctional gospel community will provide jumping-off points for ideas or illustrations of what it might look like when we actually try to live out together the things we say we believe. Each story may not always make sense right away, but just try to roll with it.

Dictionary definitions of *religion* tend to identify three characteristics: (1) belief in a god or gods (2) an organized system of beliefs (doctrines) about that god or those gods and (3) the activities, individual and communal, motivated by those beliefs.

Belief in God? Check. That's us. System of beliefs? Well, we argue enough about them and like to write them up in statements of faith that members must sign, so yes, I guess that's us too. Activities? Worship, prayer, Bible study, small groups, Sunday school, mission trips . . . uh-huh.

I'm afraid the verdict is in: Like it or not, we're religious.

What are we going to do about it?





CHAPTER ONE

# *bad religion*

**THE SPICY TANG** of weed drifts on the night air as I approach the house. I give a mental shrug—probably for the best; it should calm him down some. He’s sitting on a plastic chair in the shadows on the narrow porch, as far away from the stairs and entrance to the house as possible. Mike looks up from beneath the brim of his fedora, and I catch a glimpse of his face set hard and furious before it crumbles at the sight of me.

I’ve known Mike for twenty years, since the days when he lived in a lean-to hidden in the wooded area beside Rosedale Valley Road. We’ve become close friends through the years, and nobody on God’s green earth has ever taught me more about what it really looks like to live by faith. It’s one thing to claim it when you’ve been given the comfort of security and every advantage and opportunity, as I had; it’s of a different order

entirely when you've grown up with abuse, addictions, homelessness, time spent in jail, and the steady rain of indignities that saturate a life on the streets.

He begins talking before I'm all the way up the steps, the words spewing out of him, his voice rising to a kind of high-pitched quiet shriek—equal parts lament, accusation, and threat. Grief and anger throttle his vocal chords. He zigzags like a water bug over the surface of his beefs: Danny's being a jerk; he needs his dog; those crackers are the real criminals—they would never have called the cops themselves; he can't live like this and needs to go home; he was only trying to clean things up a bit; he's not leaving—has nowhere to go. And then the end of the tirade: He's dying—doesn't anybody get this? If Danny wants to play the hard man . . . Mike can't believe it himself yet.

Slow down, I tell him. Breathe. We'll figure it out. What happened? Some kind of household tiff that got out of hand. Hardly surprising, given the circumstances—Mike and Danny were old-school tough guys back in the day, among the hardest of the hard boys out on the streets and in the jails. Where they come from, you can never afford to back down, and all the edges and instincts they've built are still there. It'll get really ugly if it gets physical. Eventually, I leave Mike lighting a cigarette and go inside to talk to Danny.

Danny is calm and quiet—and unequivocal: Mike's going to have to go. In the morning, if he can just come in and go straight to bed. Feels bad because the guy is going through some really nasty stuff, the worst, and no wonder he's snapping, but if he stays, it'll be a total gong show. Danny is wearing only track pants despite the coolness of the night,

and I wonder to myself if this is an alpha-dog kind of thing, although his demeanor is surprisingly gentle. I understand his position, though; I do. I'd say the same thing. Bear is staying in his room and staying out of this mess. That's something.

Megna, the other Mike, appears out of the kitchen. He's clearly a little freaked out—doesn't have the same street background as the others and isn't used to this kind of volatility. He tells me Cook is on his way—Megna called him before he knew Danny had phoned me, but I'm grateful. A little dispassionate and highly competent backup will certainly be welcome if this thing goes sideways. And it still could.

I head back out to the porch. Mike, sitting there beneath his fedora, his jaw and the bones of his eye sockets a line drawing in shadow. The streetlight silvering the smoke of his cigarette, and the tears tracking down the hollows of his cheeks.

## **I'M NOT THEM**

Maybe it happens to you, too: You're having a conversation with somebody you don't know all that well, and somehow the topic comes around to God stuff. It might be that you mention going to church or quote from the Bible. If you're one of those rare individuals who is comfortable doing so, you might actually be "witnessing," but most of us are being cautious, uncertain of what the other person's perspective is. You don't want to offend or, frankly, make an idiot of yourself.

At some point the individual cocks his or her head and, after a momentary pause, asks, "So, you're religious?"

If that person had said, "Sounds like you're spiritual,"

or asked, “Are you a follower of Jesus?” it would have been simple to answer with, “Well, yeah.”

It’s that word, *religious*. It conjures up images of the Crusades and whacked-out TV preachers selling prayer hankies and fringe lunatics burning copies of the Quran while proclaiming God’s hate-of-the-week. It doesn’t at all express the way you approach your own faith.

So we chuckle nervously, people like you and me, and mutter about being a Christian, yes, a seeker—it’s more of a faith *journey*—and wind it up with “I wouldn’t say I’m religious, really, but I have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, which is a different sort of thing . . .”

While people such as Bill Maher and Christopher Hitchens (or my latest fave, the Amazing Atheist on YouTube) may offend us with their rudest statements about God and Christianity, we find ourselves also recognizing some painful truth in what they have to say. Sure, they make taking cheap shots at the looniest aspects of the church their stock-in-trade; there are, sadly, a distressing number of easy targets in organized religion. But that’s the point—we *don’t want to be lumped in with those wing nuts!* They are not us!

Of course, a clever guy such as Maher would say, “Really? You mentioned a ‘personal relationship with Jesus Christ.’ You mean the Jesus Christ who died a couple of thousand years ago? Do you converse regularly with his ghost, or is he more of an imaginary friend?”

And we would sigh, then try to explain.

Because, truly, it is a very personal matter and experience, isn’t it, this faith relationship we have with Jesus? It’s real. The

laughter of atheists doesn't disprove it; in fact, the categorical dismissal of what billions say they have experienced is both arrogant and exactly the kind of intolerance of which they so often accuse Christians.

Our faith might be dim at times or intermittent; the relationship might be shallower than we'd like it to be; we might struggle with far too many moments of doubt and enjoy too few of transcendent clarity—but whatever the character and challenges of *my* experience of God, it is my own. Nobody else, I'm sure, experiences God in exactly the same way as I do or as you do.

It makes some sense, then, that we so instinctively resist tagging our individual spiritual actualities with the one-size-fits-all label of “religion.” We don't want to align ourselves with the weird public twitches and screwball attitudes of the lumbering beast with the bull's-eye on its back. And we don't want to take that precious, personal sense of connection and lock it up in the kind of inflexible box that the word has come to imply to us.

Still, I sometimes feel—maybe it's the same for you—a bit disloyal when I distance myself from the idea of religion or being religious. It's as if I'm a teenager trying to avoid being seen with a younger, socially awkward sibling. I have the niggling sense that, while I'm trying to claim something precious and powerful by focusing on the “personal relationship” bit, I'm also, just maybe, losing something by denying that I'm religious.

One way or another, we all act out publicly what we believe internally, even if our actions are sometimes unconsciously connected to our beliefs. We live our beliefs. We recycle because we believe the environment is under stress, or we toss

an empty coffee cup out of the car window because we don't. We think guns facilitate violence and therefore refuse to own them, or we stockpile them because we believe the only answer to violence is more guns. We think that the truth is important and do our best to be truthful, or we believe that a few lies that deliver the desired result are justified.

Actually, we don't mind claiming this kind of integration of what we believe with how we act. In fact, we don't think much of people who claim to believe a certain way but behave contrary to those beliefs, whether they're Christians, atheists, Hindus, or politicians.

And that, I think, is the nut of our instinctive objection to religion: So many people and institutions appear to behave contrary to what they say they believe, or have beliefs that encourage destructive actions, that we don't want to be associated with that abusiveness or lack of integrity. We've come to view religion as the mindless adherence to a rigid system of behavior that at best is repressive and at worst gives issue to a wide range of dysfunctional and even vile activities. On a more mundane level, maybe we just don't want to be typecast or have our choices and activities restricted by inconvenient dogma.

Our problem, then, is not religion per se; it's *bad* religion. Sick religion, religion that the biblical writer James calls "worthless."<sup>1</sup>

There's no doubt that religion in general has acquired a bad name in our contemporary first-world society, and there can be little doubt that the name has been well earned. So much so that a great many of us have come to believe that all religion is the empty, worthless kind. But it's the Christian

faith specifically, and the religious expression of it, that concerns you and me, so it might be helpful for us to do a little thinking about how we've arrived at the point where we often want to disown our own religion.

As Alan Hirsch points out in his insightful book *The Forgotten Ways*, the early period of the church's existence was a time of exponential growth. From the death of Christ until about AD 100, it grew from a couple hundred uncertain followers to perhaps twenty-five thousand; over the next two hundred years (by AD 310) there were as many as twenty million disciples spread throughout the world—disciples who were poor, rejected, and often actively persecuted.<sup>2</sup> They were proclaiming and living a religion that had integrity with the words and life of Jesus, as well as claiming for themselves the power of his death and resurrection.

Fast-forward seven or eight hundred years, and we see something quite different. The poor, weak church—that had spread throughout the Roman and Byzantine world, like yeast through a batch of dough—had become a powerful entity whose political, economic, and military might dominated the Western world. The popes maintained armies of their own, and they manipulated most of the armies of Europe by means of the sale of indulgences and threats of excommunication (the classic carrot and stick). They also crowned kings and exacted tribute from them.

And the church taught that there was no salvation except through its own offices—an individual could not approach God to confess and receive forgiveness for his or her sins; instead he or she had to do so through the seven sacraments

of the church. People's souls were held, quite literally, ransom. Paying money to the church could cut years, centuries, or even millennia off the "refining" torture people would supposedly endure in purgatory before being admitted to heaven unless, if they failed the test, they were cast into hell.

The slaughter of thousands was justified during the Crusades simply because these people weren't Christians.<sup>3</sup> By means of the Inquisition, the church tortured and often put people to death merely because they were suspected of not being Christians or because they held divergent views on some arcane point of doctrine. During one shameful era in Spain, to be a Jew who had not publicly converted to Christianity meant certain torture and death. Even among "the faithful," people who were too poor to pay for church rites or too weak to perform the prescribed penances were (according to church doctrine) abandoned to the flames of hell.

It was such dissonance with Jesus' original teaching and way of life—which valued people who were as unlovely as a leper, as useless as a paralyzed man, as repugnantly "other" as an Ethiopian eunuch, as sinful as a prostitute, and as dangerous as a bandit or Roman centurion—that prompted the Reformation.

The Christian religion—the way people were living out what they *really* believed, as opposed to what Jesus, their putative "Lord," had taught—had made a sad, often obscene, frequently abusive caricature of the church.

Those of us who are Protestant can't afford to simply lay such bad religion at the door of our Catholic brothers and sisters. Martin Luther himself, famously and tragically, turned to virulent anti-Semitism toward the end of his life, publishing a



sixty-five-thousand-word treatise (longer than this book) titled *On the Jews and Their Lies*. He proclaimed that their houses and synagogues should be destroyed and that they were not God's chosen nation, but the devil's people. Certainly not a welcome to a people who were mostly poor and oppressed.

"We are at fault," he ranted, "in not slaying them."<sup>4</sup>

Are you groaning yet? Within a couple of decades, depending on who was on the throne, Catholics and Protestants were taking turns torturing, decapitating, and burning one another at the stake in England. Who in their right mind wants to be associated with such vile lunacy?

We could work our way through the centuries from then until now, but it would be too depressing, and most of us are aware of these travesties already. It should be said, however, that Christianity *has* produced much that is truly wonderful and worth celebrating. Has anyone noticed that it's the countries with a Christian heritage in which women are most valued; tolerance of divergent political or religious views is most practiced; freedom of speech, movement, and assembly is most in evidence; and educational and employment opportunities are most widely extended? Ignatius, Teresa of Ávila, Julian of Norwich, and a slew of others who were among the greatest spiritual writers in history lived during those wicked pre-Reformation times! Saint Francis of Assisi led a movement of believers who took a vow of poverty, eschewed worldly power, and dedicated themselves to announcing God's forgiveness to all. Francis even tried, it is said, to end the Crusades. Literacy, libraries, universities, hospitals, and nursing were all gifts of the medieval church to European society.

Despite these bright spots, there's no doubt our failures have often been lurid and wrought on an extravagant scale. Unfortunately, the disconnect between the Good News that Jesus announced and the way we, his followers, behave is still disturbingly evident today. The church's historic addictions to money and power seem to continue. So, yes, bad religion. (Other religions have been as bad or worse.)

Although there are significant exceptions, Western Christians as a group are among the world's wealthiest people. In itself, there's nothing wrong with that, but we do tend to use our wealth to ensure that we will stay wealthy and get wealthier instead of using it to lift others out of poverty. We'll go to war to ensure that we continue to have access to a supply of cheap gasoline, and we swallow gratefully the lies we are fed that allow us to pretend there's another, more noble reason. We've shown we're willing to line up behind leaders who flog fear, hatred, bigotry, misogyny, and the other toxic symptoms of entitlement as long as we think they'll protect our hegemony and grant us the illusion of access to power. We're more interested, it seems, in worldly power than in spiritual power.

Muslim people around the world consider the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to be religious conflicts, and they believe that Christians have invaded their countries and killed their people primarily because they are not Christian. We may not think of it that way, but *they* certainly do, and no wonder. Those wars could not have been joined by Western governments without the vocal and enthusiastic support of Western Christians.<sup>5</sup>

We have majored on a few issues of public morality, such as abortion and same-gender marriage, and largely abandoned

the cause of biblical justice—so much so that the very word *justice* has come to mean little more in our society than state-sanctioned vengeance. We're viewed as being more concerned about same-gender marriage than we are about almost a quarter of our children who are growing up in poverty,<sup>6</sup> or the insanely high incarceration rates of African Americans in the States<sup>7</sup> and the First Nations people in Canada.<sup>8</sup>

Christian churches in Canada, the States, and Australia have colluded with governments, courts, and police to strip aboriginal people of their land, livelihood, freedom of movement, culture, and even children. It has been pointed out that this amounts to cultural genocide. Several of our largest denominations participated in this spiritual and economic rape of entire peoples, often adding the actual rape of children to the long black tally of our sins. We did this over a period of about one hundred and fifty years and now spend enormous amounts of money and energy trying to avoid or minimize accountability.<sup>9</sup>

White evangelical churches in the American South were bastions of racism and oppression through the same time period. Some, alas, still are. It's true that Christians in Britain and, later, America were at the forefront of the antislavery movement. And there are some white or mixed congregations now that are powerful advocates for the true equality of black people, but it would be hard to argue that we're leading the charge. For the most part, those of us who are white, wealthy, and Christian not only have been content to live in the privilege afforded to us by the historic oppression of aboriginal and African people, but we also do everything we can to guard that privilege as if it were a right.

On a more prosaic level, why is it that the politician who gets caught with his pants around his ankles is so often a sanctimonious, family-values, God-fearing loudmouth? Why do street preachers, who are supposedly announcing *good* news, seem so angry all the time? How, when Jesus went out of his way to heal lepers, can we resent and even obstruct providing access to health care for people who are poor? How come, when a pastor goes on TV to debate almost anything with almost anybody, he usually comes off sounding judgmental, wishy-washy, or just, well, not very bright? How do some of the most ridiculously reprehensible athletes, actors, and musicians get away with ascribing their success to God?

Whew. And that's not even taking into account the pettier inconsistencies of "believers" who make nice on Sunday and screw everyone they can through the week, or say truly hateful things about gay people and just about anybody else who is not them, or beat their wives, cheat on their taxes, insist on their right to destroy the environment, or get far more excited about football or hockey or basketball than they do about anything, *anything* that has to do with God. Plus, there's insipid worship music and lame preaching . . .

*Aaaargh!*

If this is religion, leave me out.

---

A month and a half before my visit to Mike and the boys, I'd been woken by my phone vibrating on the bedside table.

“Mike calling,” the display told me, and it was 4:30 a.m. This couldn’t be good.

I answered, but he wasn’t talking to me. *Maybe he pocket dialed me*, I thought. I could hear him at some distance from the phone, yelling at someone: “I’m here. I’m right here!” I called out to him a few times, but there was no response, and about thirty seconds later the line went dead.

“Who was it?” my wife asked blearily. “Poor Mike,” Maggie said, sighing, when I told her. I called back a couple of times and got no answer, so I left a message asking him to call me as soon as he could. I was worried about him, and with good cause, as it turned out.

Later that morning, friends discovered his cryptic Facebook posts about some kind of altercation, and a photo taken from the window of his apartment of police cars and an Emergency Task Force van in the parking lot below. The caption read, “These are for me.”

There had been lots of bad times, but the recent years had been mostly good. He’d found housing, had long periods of sobriety punctuated by occasional short bursts of drug use (the opposite of his former pattern), and gotten himself a little dog who became his pride and joy. He was a big presence in our worshiping community, often giving voice to thoughts and concerns with an honest vulnerability few could match. Even the news that he had stage IV cirrhosis didn’t throw him too much off stride. His liver had dried up like a nut, leaving it about only 10 percent functional. But his faith stayed strong and his attitude positive. He joined a hepatitis C support group and spoke often about how great his new friends were there.

Still, the successive failures of some treatments and disqualifications from others took their toll. He knew the clock was ticking. As the disappointments mounted, he began to “chip”—returning to his former poisons when the darkness seemed too great to bear. As is inevitable, the sober periods began to shorten. His behavior became increasingly volatile, and a conflict with a couple of dealers who lived in the same apartment building finally flipped the switch. A neighbor claimed to have witnessed him battering his door with an ax and shouting threats in the middle of the night.

It hadn't been easy to get him out on bail. Years before, Mike had lived with me for several months, but that wasn't going to work this time. He couldn't go home, and there seemed to be nowhere else we could find him the “residential surety” required by the court—a place to live, and someone else living there who could be his surety.

It was Danny, Bear, and the other Mike—Mike Megna—who stepped up. Jones House, a Sanctuary-facilitated home they shared together, had a vacant bedroom. Long-time members of the Sanctuary community, Danny and Bear both had lengthy rap sheets, but Megna, we were all a little shocked to discover, had no criminal record at all! That's rare in our patch. I put up the money, and Megna signed off as the critical residential surety.

It was a big deal for Mike Megna, and who could blame him? Mike had welcomed Megna to the community a couple of years earlier, and Megna liked the guy, but he'd had no idea he could get violent like that. Nobody really knew what kind of state Mike would be in when he was released, and he

clearly hadn't been in a positive frame of mind when he was arrested. Megna worried that Mike might lose it again and that he, Megna, would be responsible for posting his bail—how would Mike respond to *that* if it happened? What would the courts do to Megna if he was unable to supervise Mike the way he had promised?

Bear and Danny wanted to make it clear that Mike was coming as a guest, for a couple of months if necessary, not as a prospective resident of the house. They wanted to support their brother but wisely knew the personality mix wouldn't work long term, and I agreed. They knew that, for as long as Mike stayed, there would be inevitable friction for all involved—the kind of friction that can be dangerous to the fragile stability of people who have battled addictions and long periods of homelessness for most of their adult lives.

But they counted the cost, the three of them, and then they stepped up. This is what love looks like: You lay down your life for your brother.<sup>10</sup>

## **POWER, MONEY, AND DRY BONES**

Anyone who has traveled at all in European cities has seen and marveled at medieval churches, especially the magnificent cathedrals. Soaring spires that were, at the time, the tallest buildings in the world, visible for miles around; flying buttresses with incredible carvings of saints and gargoyles; tall, slender columns so delicate that they sometimes seem to hang from vaulted ceilings (their arches leaping away from the eye of the viewer far below) instead of supporting them;

stained glass with colors so rich and designs so intricate that they can hardly be replicated today; roods, choir screens, statuary, and altars, fabulous in detail and depth, wrought in metal, wood, or stone; frescoes, paintings, and tapestries—and much, much more.

I love those churches, especially the smaller ones in little towns. And I love the art, the craftsmanship, the passion for God that compelled the artisans who built them. In this way, they're a kind of redemption of the twisted motivations of the often power-drunk church leaders who ordered their construction. That's true religion.

*However.* They also provide a terrifically accurate illustration of the problem we face—the problem of bad religion.

The Cathedral of Saint Domnius in Split, Croatia, is one of the oldest church buildings in the world. Originally constructed around AD 300 to serve as the tomb of the Roman emperor, Diocletian, it didn't actually become a church until sometime in the sixth or seventh century, long after the fall of Rome. Diocletian had persecuted Christians, and therefore his remains were removed and disposed of ignominiously; the bones of Saint Domnius, whom he had beheaded, were interred instead.

The cathedral is small and quite modest by comparison to most in Europe, and it's an unusual hexagonal shape. Still, you can identify it immediately as a church by its tall and beautiful steeple tower, added in the late Middle Ages. Visitors pay a fee to enter and view its spectacular collection of art and carvings, including portraits of Roman persecutors of the church made back when Christian baiting was an honorable



profession. For an extra five kuna, you may ascend a narrow set of stairs and view selected items from what a hand-lettered sign describes as “The Treasure of the Church.”

This treasure is a collection of brocaded surplices seven or eight hundred years old, jeweled crosses, miters, chalices, staffs of silver and gold, extravagantly bound Bibles, and elaborate reliquaries containing—often displaying—the bones of saints, gray with age. Even skulls, encased in silver.

It’s fabulous stuff, though a little grisly. Of course, no self-respecting medieval church is without such a treasury, and most are far “richer” than that of Saint Domnius.

But wait a second. *That’s* the treasure of the church?

Soaring spires and mighty buttresses. Gold and silver. Relics of dead saints.

Power, money, and dry bones.

That, it seems to me, sums up what the critics—including many of us followers of Jesus—think of when we hear the word *religion*. Power, money, and dry bones. Unfortunately, those terms apply just as accurately to much of the church’s apparent value system today, even if our architecture is less extravagant. If that’s what we’re repudiating, we’re right to do so.

Domnius and the other martyrs whose bones were dug up and delivered to the cathedral, long after their deaths, were people who had lived and laid down their lives in the most radical fashion because they loved and followed Jesus. They did not suck up to worldly power or pursue material goods. They did not seek to dominate others or create an artificial means of controlling the access of others to God’s Kingdom. Neither did they live a private, individualized

faith. They didn't major in the minor aspects of Christian dogma, point an accusing finger at the morality of others, or claim that their parishioners *expected* them to drive a gold-plated chariot.

Instead, they boldly announced that Jesus—not the Roman emperor—was King of kings and deserved their complete allegiance. They welcomed the people whom everyone else had rejected, insisting that salvation and God's grace was for everyone—especially the poor. They preached that this salvation was free, that no one could stand between God and another human being. They fed the hungry, shared what they had with people in need, and called it an act of worship. They said that Jesus was God, not the pantheon of Rome or Caesar. They claimed that no act of man was so vile that it was beyond forgiveness, that God alone is judge. They did battle with the powers of their present world and knew that, in dying, they had not lost.

I hope that God, in his mercy, prevents those old saints from seeing what has been done with their bones. I think that, even in heaven, it would cause them to weep.

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Mike's friends had been aching for him for a year or more already. He'd taken hit after hit: The failure of a six-month chemo-style treatment that was supposed to cure his hepatitis C but instead left him weak, wasted, and emotionally spun; his diagnosis with final-stage cirrhosis; a period when his public-housing apartment became unlivable; his

disqualification from further hep C treatment programs; the fear, anger, and confusion he felt at having been trapped and pistol-whipped during a convenience-store robbery he happened into; the heartbreak with the son and daughter with whom he'd worked so hard to reconnect and reconcile; his increasingly frequent battles with the drugs he had once appeared to have largely beaten.

And then it got worse.

Mike Megna went with him to the appointment and so did Paula, Mike's hep C support worker. I was there, too, when the possibility we had avoided talking about was confirmed. Cancer.

"Months," said the doctor, in answer to the impossible question. Then, after a pause, "Not a year."

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And so now here is Mike, sitting in a plastic chair at the end of the porch a couple of weeks before Christmas. His mind is whirling with fear and anger and sorrow, and as it whirls, it flings bitterness from his mouth. It's the comprehensively tragic scope of Mike's life that ratifies for me the heroic nature of his faith. Later, I will complain to my wife, "He's been screwed since the moment he was born! Why can't God at least give him a break? This is just so not fair." If anyone I know has grounds to curse God and die, it's my brother Mike.

But I do know my brother. He discovered long ago where his only real hope lies, and he knows that hope will never let go of him, nor will he let go of it. It's not easy to remember this,

or trust it entirely, in this particular moment. Everybody's emotions are high, the situation precarious. Mike is lost in his anger and bitter disappointment—at God, life, his friends, himself. The instinct in all of us to meet aggression with aggression is very lively, and no one even seems quite sure exactly where it started.

Greg Cook, another member of the Sanctuary community, arrives and sidles quietly up onto the porch. A good and trusted friend to each of the people living here, he says little, being unsure of how the situation has evolved and where it stands, but his calmness radiates.

The door opens, and Danny steps out. The tension rises again. He stands there for a beat or two, hands in the pockets of the hooded sweatshirt he has slipped on.

“Mike,” he says. “I love you, brother. I want you to stay. We all screw up. I screw up. I want you to stay.”

And the hard mask of anger Mike has been wearing slips, then melts entirely. He weeps—his chest and shoulders heaving.

Now Megna slips onto the porch, slides past Danny, and plants himself in a chair he has hiked as close as possible to Mike. Christian faith and this crazy, capricious street culture are both relatively new to him, too, and I know he finds it a little like camping on the lip of an active volcano.

He reaches out and clutches the hand lying limp on Mike's knee.

“I want to pray for you,” he says. And he does. Beautiful, simple, broken stuff.

In the silence that follows, Mike takes the cigarette Danny

extends to him, takes this peace offering and lights it, and the smoke, I think, ascends to the nostrils of God.

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The Jones House boys held Mike until the courts allowed him to return home. Megna attended each of Mike's court appearances and most of his doctor's appointments with him. Days later, Megna told me that his experience that night was a revelation to him—he'd seen God in action in a way that he had never known before, and he was hungry for more of it.

Driving home that night, I marveled too, at the true religion I had witnessed—a real, functioning body, flesh and bone, muscular with grace and love.

While writing this story, my own emotions caught up with me, and I had to stop for a while. I sent a text message to Mike:

I've been writing about you again today, and weeping.  
You're a hero of the faith to me. I love you.<sup>11</sup>

Mike responded:

I love you to Greg its all good Lord know best. Big Hug  
. . . now get back to writing.<sup>12</sup>

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