

# Letters of Testimony

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# Special Letters

*Philosophy and Faith*

## *Letter to Cecile: on Religiosity*

Cecile,

You have given me sufficient encouragement to actually write these thoughts. Thanks for setting the stage.

There is no joy in my life greater than that which I take in sharing my Lord Jesus, and what He means to me, with others. All that I am is due to Him; all things good come from God, including my family. Am I a religious person? Surely, I must be. How can I be otherwise?

There are these three ultimate questions: 1. Is God? 2. What's He like? 3. How does one know? Logically they come in this order, the former prerequisite to the latter. Experientially they are reversed.

To the first, the answers are four: yes, no, maybe or it does not matter. In actuality, from the point of view of the philosopher, the last two equate to no. While it may be true that God is and that He is doing what God does, such a philosopher either doesn't know or doesn't care and God may be dismissed - i.e. functionally no. In such case, there is no point in being religious. More poignantly, there is no point in much of anything. Only the functional atheist can truly be irreligious.

On the other hand, how very presumptuous of a man to affirm that God is, and then dismiss Him from his life, i.e. not be religious. It is not much of an affirmation to announce a god who will be taken or left as it suits the philosopher. That too is functional atheism and is

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indistinguishable from the negative.

Still, once the first question is answered in the affirmative, the next task of the philosopher is to consider God's nature, or more properly, His essence. To cut in, the question becomes, is God like the God of the Bible? Or, turned around, does the Bible speak truly of God? Is the Bible truly revelation?

The same four answers exist with the same reduction. Either the Bible is true, or it is not, functionally. If not, one must look elsewhere for moral direction, counsel and consolation. If so, then the Bible becomes an essential reference by which God can inform our lives.

Given these two affirmations, Judaism and Christianity become the foundational truth. The Bible answers the third question: we know God by His Law and His Son. Yahweh and Jesus must be affirmed. Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. There is no other way. All other ways make nonsense of the stubbornness of the Jews and the claims of Christ.

Trying to prove Jesus is the Christ does no good. Perhaps the logic is comforting, as it is for me, just to replay what I have thus far, but this is not how one comes to make these affirmations. Such reasoning does not persuade the atheist (of any stripe). No amount of reasoning ever will. There are reasons for this. This affirmation always resides in the

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domain of faith.

My witness to you is that, experientially, one comes to know God through Jesus. When one has seen Jesus, one has seen the Father. *When one reasons it out and then says, "well, that makes sense, I'll believe that," there is no witness to confirm the reason. There must come that moment when Jesus breaks through, finds you in a vulnerable moment, touches you with His love and grace, and leaves you with the simple assurance that He lives and God is like Jesus.* With this open heart, the Holy Spirit which is God rushes in, the words of Scripture burst forth their meaning, and the majesty and authority of God take on the ultimacy they demand.

God is God. God is pre-existent, creative, eternal, transcendent, all-powerful, -wise, -knowing. He is holy, loving, self-sacrificing. His grace is for everyone and He has the initiative. *He is His own witness;* there can be no other.

With this foundation of faith, comes all the rest. God's displays become visible and we can testify to His presence and providence. All things become possible. Once we know God in this way, the philosopher's sterile reasoning contributes nothing. To deny that God is, or to assert that He is not revealed in the Bible, or that Jesus is not Lord, becomes contrary to every evidence of a life of faith. God just cannot fit

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ino the philosopher's weak wineskins of deductions premised on doubt or denial, sewn together with pride and presumption. Humility before God remains the beginning of wisdom.

Jesus is all the world to me. That's not a desperate hope, or a philosopher's choice. That's a fact delivered to me straight from the throne of God. And I am grateful. Am I religious? You bet I am. How can I be otherwise? I know Jesus.

## *Letter to Cecile: More on Religiosity*

Cecile,

I am doubly pleased to receive your letter (4/30/97) in response to my first "letter of testimony." I respect your encouraging my addiction at your expense.

Regarding Webster. Dictionary definitions are too parched a soil to grow much. As I offered in my first letter to you, my religiosity cannot be reduced to a set of beliefs, practices or even moral statements. The three ultimate questions are about ultimate truth, and as such their answers must course through our experience lest it become as dry as Webster. My witness to you is the person of Jesus, whom I know and love, and whose resurrection power I trust.

You asked me if I thought you were religious in the not so "broadened" sense. At the level of Webster I do not consider the question of much relevance, and I cannot answer for one not myself. Still, there is much to be gleaned from your short description of your experience of God. Absent the formalized practices, you affirm God's reality, confess a conscious morality, and respond with thankfulness to His natural wonders and frequent (supernatural?) signs. These suggest a fertile heart.

Your "free association", which is hardly free, is very telling. You have learned to attach some very commendable attributes to the likeness



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of God: beside omniscience and omnipresence you have posited *goodness, mercy and wisdom*. Still, you say you have trouble with the Bible. My dear Cecile, you could never have associated even this set of attributes with God were it not for the Bible and its role in our culture, the same culture from which you learned your moral code. And what of *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness and, gentleness etc.?* These are attributes of the Hebrew God, and the Father of Jesus, and it is the Bible that defends that position. Reject the Bible, and you reject all foundation in religious literature for the kind of God you freely associate with such *personal* characteristics. The god of Islam (the Koran) is not like that. The godhead of Hinduism and its variants (pantheism) is not like that.

Good luck in your resolve to read the Bible and the Koran through. I may, had I kept a log, lay claim to the former, but certainly not the latter. While a genuine act of intellectual integrity, to think that this exercise might somehow settle the questions and allay your sense of hypocrisy, is, forgive me, also flawed in my Christian view. Truth is not determined by our intellectual preferences; were it so, we would be gods. Our relationship to God is not a function of our scholarship. We are not "saved" by what we know or affirm. We are saved (or not) by whom we

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seek. No intellectual system carries saving grace. If God is nonexistent or irrelevant, why should one feel any guilt (hypocrisy) for not being religiously informed since there would be no supervisory authority who cares? And if there is a legitimate God, then how can we embrace at once contradictory declarations about Him? We must choose, and that choice must resonate with the truth which derives from His essence, not from the declarations themselves. Whew! See letter 1.

Moral direction and counsel are easily found, for good or ill. The world is full of philosophy and advice. But I am touched by your expression of an emptiness which, at times, needs consolation. Consolation is another matter. Only a person can console another. Words console only when they come from a person who cares. You do admit God, closely identified to His creation, and beyond comprehension. And you, yourself, raise the question: are we supposed to know/comprehend that which is so immense and of which we are but a minuscule part? With one clarification, the answer is "yes-." The clarification is this: *we are not part of God.* It takes a pantheist to suggest we are. (The "god" of which we might be called "*apart*", is nature, and science probes nature's truths every day. Should one feel unclean for it?) Alternately, God, says the Bible, is preexistent, other, transcendent - and *covenantal*. We are the apple of His eye and the

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object of His love. He asks only that we orient ourselves toward Him (covenant with Him) in the same way. To avail to us a personal relationship with Him is precisely why Jesus was sent (the new covenant). Once again, if God is nonexistent or irrelevant who's to care what foundational truth we access or don't? And if a legitimate God wants to be known, who are we to presume His error? I know your consolation. His name is Jesus, and He is *the* Son of God. He alone consoles all our emptiness. He alone adds personal relation to our knowledge of God, and as such He commands a central place in any formulations we might make about God.

I think you know this. It is this yearning for a personal God that God Himself, says the Bible, places in the human heart. It just may be that your rejection of the inexplicable desire to "leap" has only served to deprive you of the consolation you seek. I speak as one who has made the leap and found consolation.

However, your intellectual tolerance has not spared you from being *judgmental* as you suggest. You have already judged those who seek to "save" and "lead" you; those who talk *too much* and demonstrate *too little* your conception of godliness; those churchgoers who do not *seem to you* to walk the walk as they *should*. And to justify yourself in this you have called Jesus a blasphemer. Yes, you have. Jesus claimed to be *the only*

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*begotten* Son of God. He would never ascent to being merely a son of God. If God has many sons, or if being a son of God is merely to have an angelic commission or a prophetic calling, then Jesus' claims to the Godhead are blasphemy. That is exactly what the Jewish leaders of His day believed, and they crucified Him for it! How's that for judgment?

Of course, says the Bible, Jesus did admonish us against judging others. Perhaps letter 3 should deal with this matter in expansion. But, for now, consider that Jesus did not admonish us not to judge *beliefs*. The secular doctrine of "tolerance" serves only to elevate confusion and contradiction to fill God's place, since God is absent in that system. Indeed, the Bible is full of judgment on false doctrine, false prophets, and false hearts. But these are viewed as part and parcel of the problem of sin from which Jesus came to redeem us. *His judgment* was to die for us while we were still in error. While standing opposed to the beliefs that would deny Jesus His place in my heart as Emanuel (God with us), I can only seek to love as He first loved me. No other "system" can instruct with authority that we love our enemies, or submit to abuse because we have taken the leap and now stand on Jesus' side of the great divide. If you seek to avoid judging others, you must stand with Jesus. Why? Because no man-made philosophies (systems for declaring truth and error) can assert and demonstrate divine authority as Jesus, who has

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taken hold of me and calls me heavenward, has. While I am not here to impose consequences on those who live as enemies of the cross of Christ, I *am* here to contend for the gospel.

As I review what has found its way to these pages, I stand firm. I trust my sharing is received with the love intended in Christ Jesus. It is not mine to hold you accountable for the reflections of the world's misrepresentations of Jesus which have been challenged here. I seek only to be edifying and thereby to help introduce you to the freedom in Christ which liberates God from the confinement of His immensity. God is not just big, He is all the rest of that list, starting with Love. Sure, He transcends our understanding, but we can know Him through Jesus Christ, and grow in Him with confession, prayer, petition and thanksgiving. I confess to you my prayer and petition on your behalf, and I do thank my God every time I think of you. Maybe, the next time your heart yearns to leap, or the emptiness comes, or you marvel at God's creation, or God presents a sign, you will find it easy to cede to Him the control of your life, offer back that affirmation He has seeded in you, and talk to Him, as *a friend*. I love when that happens.

## Letter to Diane: on Pride and Calling

Dear Adam,

I stroked this during one of those mandatory training (political correctness) programs. It wasn't such a bad program really, but it didn't warrant all the time spent on it. Anyway, I thought this pondering might speak to your BSU leadership and the issues with your friends we discussed the other night.

Pride, it seems to me, comes in two ways. There is *active* pride in which a person makes a deliberate evaluation of themselves and says, "I'm good." The truth of the claim is not relevant. What is important is that some idea of excellence, and a need to compare to it, is implied. Such pride is up front - the front door.

*Passive* pride comes through the back door. It says, "I'm okay." As you will quickly detect, no standards and no need to compare is implied. I may or may not be "good", but my shortcomings are *not important*. This is no less prideful than the other. Passive pride says, "I don't *need* to be good. I'm *good enough*" which is little different in any practical sense from saying "I'm good." Christians for whom divine forgiveness is taken to mean "my sin isn't important any more" are particularly susceptible to passive pride. Cheap grace.

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Now, active pride is easily dealt with. It is of the flesh. All that is required is a good dose of failure relative to the chosen standards. Failure finishes active pride.

But passive pride is spiritual, a creation of the devil, a deception. It masquerades as humility. No amount of failure need disturb someone who is happy being good enough, giving evil a veto over good (*a la* C.S. Lewis), making good an accomplice to evil (*a la* John Hagee). Satan's greatest deception is the lie that sin does not matter, precisely because it mutes the moral imperative and with it the cry for help. As with active pride the only remedy for a devaluation of sin is a re-evaluation of it, but there is a difference in how this is induced. Where active pride is reversible by way of personal failure to achieve one's own imperative, passive pride may require a threat to one's person or belongings. All-out cultural collapse may be necessary to reverse passive pride. It is for this reason that God permits cultures which despise His righteousness to suffer degradation and subjugation. Wealth insulates us from the sin of others. Sadly it seems, it is only when the unwitting proud suffer the consequences of another persons' disregard for their interests that the search for righteousness begins, and with it the chance to realize one's own inadequacy.

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It is for this reason, I think, that Scripture, after Jesus, is so much devoted to urging holiness in the flock. The standards of goodness from the OT law must not become void. Jesus' extensions of God's righteousness do not reduce sin to insignificance, but rather elevates righteousness to the heartfelt impossible: the desire of our heart which cannot be. The only valid response thus becomes, "God, help me!" The re-evaluation of excellence (restoring the moral imperative) makes pride deliberate, failure certain, and atonement efficacious once again.

The Greek ongoing present (my term) is nowhere more important than in matters of repentance and salvation. In English, to repent and to forgive, while present tense, really mean only that what is now passed was not so until just now, and having become present, it is now true forever. This is the linguistic root to our lazy theological ideas that repentance and salvation happen once and that's that; we can all come together in "unity" and "tolerance" now that sin is no longer important. The notion of eternal security as traditionally held becomes hard to defend in all this, but survives with some much needed insight.

The Greek actually says something more like "be continually repenting" and God will "be continually forgiving." When repentance and salvation are continually in the present tense, they can be received



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always and forever - always coming upon us new. Neither repentance nor forgiveness are once and finished. True surrender is both forever and recurring! Imperfection and failure are merely occasions for continuing surrender, repentance and forgiveness. Past, present, and future are *now* with God. At the same *time*, past is future and future, past. To stop action in mid-term is to remove it from eternity. Tense appears meaningful only from within time. From this perspective any action must span all tense: yesterday I acted, today I act, tomorrow I will act. Yesterday isn't *good enough*. But our citizenship is in heaven and our life eternal. If we but gave proper weight to this reality, we would understand our salvation as eternal and present. From the perspective of eternity, tense is a false distinction., whether the reference is to surrender, repentance, confession, prayer, worship, service, or any of the virtues (honesty, diligence, fidelity, etc.).

It is this ongoing present, as I've called it, that makes morality imperative at all! *Always now* is the time for righteousness. Always now is the time for our renewed cry "God, help me!" And He does, always now. The atonement of Jesus Christ, like our own decision to embrace God, works backwards and forwards in time.

This is, I think, the real sense of the blessedness of hungering and

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thirsting after righteousness. I'm not proud. I am forever gripped by my failure to meet God's transcendent righteous standards, and I am likewise forever committed to try. I am forever blessed by God's always new willingness to receive me in my best efforts and to augment and perfect them by His continuing presence in me. I treasure God's daily renewal, and cannot imagine why anyone who knows the loving grace and presence of God would ever select to face a new day with this wonderful renewal lost in yesterday? I am eternally secure because my new life is forever new.

My beloved son, I love it when the Spirit does this to me. I'm glad you're there.

## Letter to Diane: on Pride and Calling

Diane,

I am so delighted by your loooong letter. I thank you for your birthday greeting and the neat report on the children. I am honored that you invested so much of yourself in writing me. I was disappointed only by your failure to include the "silly ditty" you promised! It wasn't there. I suspect you just became so caught up in telling your story that the early promise slipped through. I still want it however, perhaps in your response to this, my offering. And I can report a wonderfully loooong and joyous visit with your folks on our birthday. That means so much to me as well...

You asked my advice and counsel. Advice is cheap, easy and travels well in the mail. Counsel, I'm afraid, cannot occur without dialogue which is much harder to freight. So I shall respond as the Lord leads me, trusting that you and He will have the good sense to sift through my presumption and receive God's own counsel. I shall just enjoy thinking of you and praying for you as you have drawn me closer by your invitation.

Obviously you are troubled by this spiritual division in your Church. Sad to say, the scene seems too familiar. There is an enemy out

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there, in force and on the loose. He is *Pride*. Take care. You are not immune. Your own words reflect that you have considered the possibility yourself. And your own words give credence to the consideration: "... I get *my* position of *leadership* ,..", "... /will not be allowed to step *up* into *my* calling ...". These phrases are alarming. Now get ready for this, for you already know what I'm about to say. In God's Kingdom, leadership is found *down* not *up*. In Christ, servants lead and leaders serve. And there's more. Leadership is not a prize God bestows to reward or honor someone. Leadership is a burden made light by God's preparation for the tough job of bringing His less than perfect people together for His purposes. Once leadership has become an object devoutly to be sought, it becomes more useful to the enemy than to God. God prefers a reluctant leader and an obedient servant.

Now, that's the closest I'll be coming to chastising you. I celebrate the rest. I celebrate God's calling on you to be His intercessor. I celebrate your return to your first calling. I celebrate your willingness to step away from the many good works which you had entered which diverted you so long. I celebrate the many signs and confirmations He has granted you of His anointing on your life. And I celebrate what He is about to do with your life.

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Intercession. How special. What position of service could bring one closer to the Master's heart? To seek the counsel of the Lord, to hear His voice, to follow His leading, to speak His authority into matters as He directs - oh how special.

And what could be more selfless - and humbling? The authority to speak God's Word into the fray is a dangerous thing. His Word cuts both ways. It prunes His vine, routs His enemies, burns his servants, and works His will. Your instinct to run from this call may have been an early display of wisdom, and your reawakening may speak God's decision to draw you closer to His perfecting fire. But this spiritual warfare you're in is, I suspect, part of your schooling. Forget the details for a while, Diane. Stand back and see the loneliness of the place you seek. You spoke of a cloister or a closet and dismissed it as error. Reconsider. While you may be very visible amongst the Body as the "leader" of the Prayer Ministry, intercession itself is done in that agonizing and wonderful secret relationship with God Almighty. No matter how public your place, your work will be very intimate indeed.

All this has very real implications in the way of spiritual maturity. All this wrangling and arguing, all this side-chosing and guilt by association, even when false, all these allegations and defenses - none of

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this is of God. None of this is consonant with God's true church. Are you called to leadership? There is no place more lonely. All the comfort and safety you've known in the past from being pastored and cared for in a loving community is about to be replaced by the aloneness with the Lord that comes with leadership. The entirety of your strength must derive from Him, directly from Him, and no longer from being included in the programs of the Church. In a very real sense, you must rise above the fray if you are to pray over it. Don't fight for a place in purgatory when a place in heaven awaits. Do your fighting with the gift of prayer you have claimed in Christ Jesus. Stay close to the Truth, and stop advocating for your *self*. Stay close to the Lord and trust that not everything that happens is for your benefit; there are those in this situation that God loves, may wish to correct perhaps, and in/by whom He is doing His work. Pray for them, as the Lord leads. Don't try to save anything, not even your Church as you have known it. If it is worthy to be saved, your prayers as a gifted intercessor will do more than all your feeble attempts to set things right.

Now a few questions. I don't know the answers, only that I am given to ask them. Are you called to lead an area wide prayer ministry because you organize well, or because you know something about fervent

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and effectual prayer? Is your contribution to schedule a prayer team, or to point the way to spiritual maturity for those on that team? Do you really think God's designs can be thwarted by youthful selfishness and nepotism in the pastoral families? Is prayer to be dispensed like pills at a pharmacy, or as warmth on the Spirit breeze? Will a prayer ministry be a success when it is running smoothly, or when the hand of God is plain where the Spirit has directed your pleadings?

A few final thoughts. Diane, perhaps you should consider doing the job, but without a title. If organization is needed, pray God give you His grace for this or send another with a gift of administration.

Stay close to Ephesians 6. Study and attend to your armor. These are the accouterments of a spiritual warrior: truth, righteousness, confidence in your knowledge of the gospel, faith, salvation and the Word of God. Herein lies the only credibility your prayer requires. Purify yourself constantly. You must if you are to pray constantly. Intercession is a sober business.

Gossip is an ugly thing, and a damning thing to be accused of, even falsely. I'm sure you had no intention of such. But once again, you must rise above. As a leader, especially a leader of such a high calling as intercession, you must seek to stay removed from such fleshly

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skirmishes. Your calling is Christ's direct challenge to the enemy. You will be the target of every cheap deception the enemy has to discredit you. You need discernment to know which battles need fighting. Once again, if you have not been given God's grace-gift of discernment, then you will need to align yourself with someone who has, someone who needs your partnership to complete God's purpose. Our Lord, on the night He was crucified, stood silent while the enemy stampeded through history every false accusation he could round up, to no avail. Only the truth of His claim to be our Savior would condemn him. This is more than a nice object lesson. It is the very image into which we are to be molded.

Well, talk about speaking into a void. I know so little of your needs to have said so much. I certainly have little to offer about "starting a ministry." I can identify with your writing ambition. I have not given any thought to writing a novel (I want to be the first to read yours), but I am nearing completion of a manuscript of devotional writing. In fact, this letter has now become a part of it. I hope you don't mind. I call it *Letters of Testimony* and it consists of just such witness as this, as people invite or prompt a gush of opinion, or even insight. Enjoy, my dear one. God bless you, and His work in you.



## Letter to Diane: on Pride and Calling

Ransom,

I suspect you may consider this letter a bit forward. Several times over the years you have taunted me with your agnosticism. You seem to enjoy dropping some little crack to challenge me to some kind of shallow repartee over the matter of my religiosity - or more precisely, to parade your lack of it. The other day you did it again. I tried to deflect this playful thrust, suggesting that my faith was in God, not religion. You were all too ready for such a trite return, but then, the situation was not conducive to a more thorough treatment. I resolved to give you a more complete witness than you ever seem to have time for. This is it.

Before I engage, I want you to be quite certain of my respect for you and the pleasure I take in your company. None of this, ah, "repartee" did I say, is meant in less than the kindest of spirits. Frankly, I must confess a kind of tenderness toward what I perceive, and you must surely deny, to be a searching or yearning. It is almost as though you were saying, "I wish it were all true. I wish I could believe in God too." (You need neither affirm nor deny this. It would not change my sensing of the matter.) It is precisely because I feel this to be true of you that I even bother to engage at all. If I thought you were a hard-core agnostic, or an atheist in disguise, I would probably just leave you to your foolishness.

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But you are usually quite gentle in your teasing, and never zealous in defense. I detect a weakness of the heart. You are by nature a gentle man, and there is much hope in this.

Ransom, I cannot imagine looking life, relationships, tragedy and blessing, mystery and science, hope and despair - the whole fabric of human experience - square in the face and then asking, "is God?" only to answer, "no." This is the fool's choice. More precisely, in your case you have actually answered, "I don't know." But it comes out the same. In fact, Ransom, there are only two answers to the question: there is "yes", and there is everything else. It is as simple as this. The totality of values, purpose and meaning - the essential structure of our lives - must derive from transcendence, or we must try to create it for ourselves. And no matter how we dress it up, we cannot truly define value, purpose or meaning for a life we cannot first create.

Now, I suspect you've heard all that before. And if so then obviously you have not been moved by it. There seems to be more at work in you than a mere resistance to a deistic conceptual frame. It is your playfulness with the whole subject that troubles me - like a child's dare. It's like saying, "go ahead, make an argument I can't deny. Prove it to me ... (please?)." Ransom, forgive me, but I must ask: Have you

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ever considered how arrogant and prideful it is for a man, who cannot provide values, purpose and meaning which remain condensed beyond the eulogy, to scoff at transcendence, or to laugh at those who announce their acquaintance with the transcendent? I'm a pretty serious guy. I take God seriously. When I tell you that I live my life in response to a living God, *I'm not kidding*. Not only am I not kidding, I'm not kidding about the most important reality of all. My relationship to God through Jesus Christ is not a plaything. Your chuckle and tittle is no insult to me, but I would be embarrassed by such superiority, such hardened refusal to consider the possibility that the supernatural is real. To me this is what is revealed in your trivializing tease.

You are, like the rest of us, a mere inkblot in the squash of time. Without the transcendent, we are meaningless blobs in search of a transient interpretation with no more reality than those who survive us provide - as long as they care. You joke at the absurdity of your own existence then act superior to those who claim better. "Proud of it." That was your affirmation the other day. Agnostic, and proud of it. I don't see what's to be proud of. Does it take such superior insights to embrace an accidental universe and make a shallow truce with all the begging questions? What could be more flawed than to elevate man's paltry, and

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faulty, capacity for understanding to the seat of ultimacy and then to justify the rejection of something greater on the strength of one's reason? Neither is this funny.

At another point, I do not understand trying to live as though the answer did not matter. These are foundational issues, so, if one is truly *agnostic* then they must continue to hold out the possibility that God is real, and to treat the subject with dignity. It makes no sense to me to assert that as long as a question is open, the answer doesn't matter. Strange logic. Is murder a bad thing? Don't know, doesn't matter. Is surviving tragedy a good thing? Don't know, doesn't matter. Is fidelity in marriage necessary? Don't know, doesn't matter. Fill in the blank. As long as I don't know, it doesn't matter. Strange logic indeed. Of course, the opposite is true. Unanswered questions demand answers. Is the railroad crossing safe? Don't know, could kill you (would that matter?). You could go on with this. It comes back to the big one. If the question of the reality of God is still viable, the answer matters a lot! And not just answers, but correct answers. Truth matters. It is no good to post the staircase "safe" when it isn't. And where God is concerned, His reality is the ultimate matter. So, at the very least, the question deserves some serious respect.

## Letter to Diane: on Pride and Calling

Another problem with questions is that one has to be willing to grant truth when it is uncovered. Most truth is not so removed when we are willing to see it. It takes a willing heart and a willing mind to receive truth when it comes. I suspect that when one lives for unanswered questions, answers become the enemy. To answer the questions is to leave one without the question. Whatever shall we do? We'd rather not know. For God to really exist, and for that to matter in some way, means we are no longer in charge. There's that pride and arrogance again, the veritable seed of rebellion.

Ransom, pray as I do that all this might make it easier for you to entertain God in your life, I don't expect it will. It's just the way we humans are. Once we've got ourselves firmly on the throne of our own structures for meaning, purpose and value, we don't want to give way. Not even when God turns out not only to be real, but to be all-wise and all-loving. Not even when God turns out to be willing to turn history upside down so we can get a better look at him, and put the alternatives out on their bellies. God is talking, moving, showing Himself every day to the willing. I'm one. I tell you only what I know: that the structures of God in my human experience have opened God to my awareness. I was blind, but now I see. I was deaf, but now I hear.

## Letter to Diane: on Pride and Calling

Oh, Ransom, I don't embrace every prophet that comes along and I wouldn't expect you to. Counterfeits are everywhere, and *they are always known by their comparison to the real thing*. It's not about religion, like God's currency as it were. It's about the government that stands behind the currency. If you don't know, don't mock. If you don't know, find out. If you don't know, then seek, ask and knock until God becomes manifest to you. Part of what God is saying is that what keeps a man from knowing the One True God is his groundless self-presumption which blocks his inviting God into his will and reason. You want proof? It's been there all the while. It's there now, in rich detail and full Technicolor. All you have to do is loose your grasp on the unanswered question and begin to probe the Word with an open mind, and a willing heart.

## **Letter to Diane: on Pride and Calling**

May the One True God, and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, shatter and restore you. May He correct, direct and bless you throughout your days, so that you may *become* the blessing to your wife, children, friends, peers and all those who share the life you have been given.

## Letter to Laura: On Protection and Grace

Laura,

This is probably more of a prayer than a letter. I do not know what is happening inside you. I cannot presume to know what should be happening. I only know my own ferocious gratitude. As I go over the events of last evening, I am almost overcome by the stark contrast between the way things are and the way things might have been.

Last night two of my children walked away from death. Miracle? Who can ever know. A sign or wonder? Absolutely. God is in control. For the rest of your life you will be living on borrowed time. Glenn too. We're all living on borrowed time. What are God's intentions in this? Beyond thanksgiving, how should we respond? What should we be learning? Tragedy is all too common for us to be so blessed. What does it all mean?.

"The Preacher" (Ecclesiastes) tackles the problem of meaning and concludes that the fear of God and obedience even in hidden things is the only route to true meaning. Anything else is wasting. Jesus taught and exemplified perfect respect for His Father and obedience of the heart. He draws us into ever increasing trust in a loving Father. God is in control. All of our plans, fears, worries, guilt, regret, anger, and even our opinions



## Letter to Laura: On Protection and Grace

are meaningless apart from our obedient reliance upon Him.

You talk of it (the accident) all being your fault. This fault troubles you. Being capable of such error frightens you. Being as out of control in life as you were helplessly out of control of your car last night is frightening.

Facing death is easier than facing life out of control. Last night you escaped worse than your own death. You escaped having to live with the knowledge that you had been the reason for the death of another. For now, you do not have to live out your days knowing you were responsible for the continuing anguish and anger of those who mourn the death or disability you caused.

I can only be grateful. But before this day is done, all that was escaped last night could come crashing in upon us. We are not in control. Life with us at the wheel is meaningless.

I share your guilt. You are my child. Whatever frailty you carry I helped to put there. What of my decisions? So many times I have feared for you on that highway. What could I have done to decrease your dependence upon Columbus? Even now I mourn the distance (physical and emotional) that seems to exist between us day to day. So many

## Letter to Laura: On Protection and Grace

times I have held back, not spoken, not insisted . . . Have I not parented as I should? Have I triggered for you a swerve or skid or spin or roll from which you cannot recover?

The answer? Probably yes. I am frail and imperfect. And the older I get the more I know what it means not to be in control. The easier it would be to give in to guilt and self-doubt. Except for Christ Jesus.

In Christ I am free from all that. I am grateful. But this freedom is not without its cost. Relying on God each day is very demanding. The energy I spend seeking is so much greater. The time I spend trying to control things is less, but my impatience and yearning to grow with God races out ahead of me. The intensity of my feelings and sensitivity for others whom I love, or who are struggling with life without God to depend on, just keeps growing. As I relax in my own heart, I begin to feel the urgency in God's heart to serve and to rescue His children.

Being in control is so self-centered. I begin to understand that only when I give up control to God do I become more able to make God's difference in the world. Through good fortune or tragedy, through thanksgiving or mourning, our dependence upon God is increased. Paul said it over and over: "All things work together for good . . .", or "Thy

## Letter to Laura: On Protection and Grace

grace is sufficient . . . "

Here recently I have begun to pray the forbidden prayer: "Lord, I want it all." I don't care if anyone knows my name. I don't care if I never sleep another night. I don't care if I am hungry or shipwrecked or exalted. All I want is to know more of You; to have more of Your gifts; to experience more of Your daily grace. I want to speak in tongues more than I do. I want to see You move mountains through prayers of faith. I want to see the sick healed and the lame to walk. I want to prophesy and counsel with Your wisdom and knowledge. I want to see and even direct miracles and signs and wonders that strengthen Your children's faith and draw the perishing to You.

I believe that last night's accident is partly an answer to this prayer. I believe it is a sign or wonder, if not a miracle, that God is honoring my prayers for you and Glenn. Your car, while itself destroyed, was not an instrument of death - which I forbade in prayer. If one is to have an accident, this was about as sanctified as it gets.

I also believe that God is honoring mine and mother's continuous prayers for you children. We pray constantly for your deliverance from all manner of human frailty or demonic influence which would steal your

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blessing in Christ or keep you in bondage.

Since I am writing to you in particular, one prayer I have offered for a long time was for you to hold on to me, hug me, rest your head on my shoulder, and lean on me emotionally - even if just for a little while. I have your father's yearning for his daughter's affection and trust. It has not been easy for you. Last night, for a minute or so, this prayer too was answered. I cried. I give God the glory.

I believe that God is answering our prayers for you in some manner which I do not understand but which includes the events of last night. God loves you, and mother and I too, enough to trust us with this. It is quite an investment He's making.

And in God's amazing economy, He is answering your own prayers at the same time! He knows where you need to go from here and He is going to allow to you whatever serves to get you there. God's interest in us compounds daily.

It seems to me that what you need to be doing now - what I would seek to do in your place - is to work with God any way He likes. Let Him build on this moment. Let Him change your life even more. Look inside yourself for growing signs of God's heart. Let last night be a new

## **Letter to Laura: On Protection and Grace**

birthday. You're living on borrowed time.

And right now, I'm writing on borrowed time. But please know that I rejoice at how things played out last night. And I further rejoice at how God is acting in our lives.

## Letter to Drew: on Renewal and Grace

Drew,

I thank God for you, for your renewal, for your precious, loving and loyal family, and for your remembrance of me in your recent time of trial. May we all continue to know God's blessings.

I yearn to spend some frivolous time with you all, especially the children, but I guess you and I were never the most frivolous of folks. Right now I am eager to speak of your letter. So I will assume that you understand my more business-like style and beg your forgiveness if I offend.

I rejoice to know where you have come and the insight you have gained. Our world views are remarkably similar. As models, their language and appearance are different, but their workings are parallel. Still, despite their congruity, these models diverge at the crucial point of ultimate significance which I cannot but discuss.

You speak of coming to the light at the end of the tunnel; I believe that to be the True Light of God. You speak of the lasting nature of a long friendship without nurture; I speak of the power of God's Love to instill even feeble human love with an echo of eternity. You seem concerned that you may have quenched *my* trust in and regard for you (which is

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nonsense); I hear confession. You speak of depression and suicidal ideations; I hear a crisis of hope, adequacy, shame, or some such. You speak of beating the odds; I hear answer to prayers. You speak of the good fortune of losing [your mistress]; I would call it being lead not into temptation. You speak of intimacy as an elixir, intoxicating and addictive, and so it is; I observe that the best of God's gifts are the most destructive in corruption, and the most blessed when consonant with His designs. You speak of returning to [your wife] and making things better than before; I hear repentance. You doubt the possibility of being addicted to [your wife]; I hear the door creaking open on sanctification and blessing.

Two models of human experience. In one, man is vulnerable to addictions and attractions from which a combination of good intentions, good fortune and strength of will, along with the chance intervention of friends and professionals and the loyalty of family combine to get him through. In the other, man is sinful, self-willed and altogether hapless from which only the Love of God manifested in family, fraternity, forgiveness, hope, intimacy, answered prayer and providence, combine with conscience, repentance and confession to draw him and deliver him

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to the Light. As far as they go, the two models might appear to be interchangeable, a matter of taste or linguistic preference. But there is a difference.

The latter model is scriptural, embodied in the Wisdom of the Ages. There is nothing new under the sun. This wisdom is presented as revelation and is devastating in its insights far beyond these parallel models. When I look, I increasingly find each lasting insight I accumulate from my world is already expounded in God's Word. Moreover, as I too have experimented with truth and brought myself and my loved ones near disaster and been retrieved at just the last minute, I find that God's Word had been there warning me all along, and I was not paying attention. Well, the interlude comes to this: The scriptural model is distinguished not only in its language, but by the the very real presence of the God of revelation.

This struck me most when you described an ideal family as one which lives, plays, travels and works together. While all this is an accompaniment of God in the world, its ideal quality places on its members the entire weight of meaning and joy which derive from those shared temporal lives. This family is not reported to pray, praise,



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worship, study the Word or serve in obedience together - which is of God but focused on Him and transcends our human frailty. The first model is functional materialism and is earth-bound; the second is practical theism and is transcended by an actively involved God. You, of course, know all this. I merely point out that your analysis of your recent renewal is earth-bound, not heaven-bound. For myself, I consider your travail and restoration evidence consistent with God's love for you. You were blessed!

So what's new? We've had this debate all our days. I guess it is at this point that I earnestly pray I be of good service. I fear that you have missed the moment, that you are left where you began. It is this which moves me to this witness more than anything else. If you have gained only a sigh of relief, an enlarged knowledge of vulnerability, and a resolve to anticipate and resist temptation in the future, then what have you gained? You've always been like that! You will not have been lifted up and out. Allied with your old, now discredited, mentors of Education and Experience alone to steer you around your most destructive behavior, you will have missed the great Ally revealed in your life. You will have simply dug deeper in. Not even your anguish will have any lasting significance.

Lets pile it all on. For all your earnest desire and self-discipline,

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you have failed. You described yourself in adulterous, deceitful, compromising, cruel, intemperate, falsely accusing, worldly, proud, and blasphemous terms. The list is endless black. The revelation is that all men are all these things even in their best intentions, without God. What logic is it to laud a struggle for goodness that cannot be attained? Without both Jesus Christ and God's specific grace to each of us, the struggle must be devoid of enduring content. My beloved friend, our stories are not about us. They are about God wanting us. The God whose divine intervention you so distance is the author of the great, high standards you strive so hard to achieve. That is where your wonderful ideas of loyalty, hard work, service, family, and even gratitude derive. The mystical power of family that saved you of late was God's power, placed there by design. The power of [your wife's] forgiveness was God's power, the same power to restore that you invested in her years before when she could not redeem herself from her own transgression. The "error" you committed accusing [your mistress] was God's providence to restore the true desire of your heart. The revival of our long neglected friendship, the placement of your psychologist friend, the preservation of your career and reputation - This was all God's hand. And most of all it was all God's

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part in honoring your good intentions and fierce nobility however feeble your efforts to get through by sheer force of will. I envy you that. Strong will, rightly applied, is God's too. There is nothing good that comes not from God.

My benediction for you is this. I thank God for an eternity with Joy, for which temporal survival is so small a consolation. I praise Him for His wisdom. I pray that you will enter this Kingdom, not by uttering the password(s) or by being "convinced", but by choosing to answer the unanswerable question in God's favor. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him, worship Him in Spirit and in truth.

If I have been unfair to you then I am deeply embarrassed. I want so much to join with you in continually worshipping and praising the God who has honored your devotion and delivered you back your life by His grace.

## Letter to Candice: on Gnosticism

My dear, most thoughtful, Candice,

You have given me a priceless gift and the book you so quickly obtained for me has proven to be a wonderful stimulation and challenge. As you shall see, I am not given over to Simon's philosophy. But his character and teaching are provoking, and could easily be compelling. So your gift continues as I seek to clarify my response to the ideas contained in the book.

Precious metal have I precious little, but what I have I share with you. I fancy myself a rather insightful critic, especially in matters theological; an apologist of sorts. Charm can dress truth and veil error equally. I love art. I responded artfully to Mr. Mandino's writing. But I detect in the gospel according to Simon some seed of error.

When introducing the book to me you spoke equivocally as to whether Mr. Mandino's perspective was "Christian". It is partly for this reason that I engage you now in this way. If my expression here is revealing or compelling to you, then perhaps I will have returned your thoughtfulness toward me and made good my debt. This is my prayer. And I always love to have occasion to write like this; a double blessing.

You have heard it said that one cannot judge a book by its cover.

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One can, however, judge the ideas of a man by his book. The sensitivity and outward, other-directedness of Simon are godly to be sure. His joy in reclaiming lost humanity is warming. How can one rebuff an angel, rich with the wisdom of the ages, made vulnerable by the suffering he has shared (experienced?). What a comfort it is to think that somehow all of human experience has a consistent thread, is simple at its roots, and lies always and easily within one's grasp. Surely the world would be a better place if all were as Simon. Surely every person would be a better person if they practiced the four (five) resurrection principles. Surely there is hope for these both; it is only a choice away.

But is Simon's choice the right one? Is Simon's choice the choice that reunites man with his hope? At it's dry, academic foundations, Simon's analysis is that man was evolved by God to a unique level of rarity and perfection, and then he forgot his perfection. His thinking *devolved* to guilt, shame, doubt, confusion, fear, remorse, anxiety, hate etc. His will turned to self-destruction because, deep down, he "knows" he is not all he should be. In short, man has lost his self-esteem: that right and proper appraisal of himself as the perfect and boundless creation. Despair follows. He blames God, does not count his blessings,

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and stops trying. Sadly, he is persuaded that he is unable to choose to return to the truth of his worth and his place as an object of God's love and grace. (One could go on and on, but I think this is a fair summation.)

Now, the problem in all this for me is that several Judeo-Christian foundations are violated. For example, In Christianity, sin *is not lack of knowledge, it is rebellion*. It is precisely the pursuit of being like God outside God's Lordship and against His will (the apple) which introduced the autonomy (rebellion) which cannot bring blessedness. The wonderful values of Simon's world - love, outreach, unselfishness, etc. - are part and parcel of God's intentions too. But they are missing in our world because of sin, not because of ignorance. In Christian doctrine, thinking one can get the ultimate blessing on one's own or in his own way is the original sin and the height of foolishness.

In Christianity, Jesus, the ultimate ragpicker if you must, does not dispense knowledge of perfection. He teaches, yes, often and much. But his teachings, while not always understood, are not secrets. They are either practical ethical directions or they elucidate the character and will of His Father. He heals and restores people - miraculously. He dies a horrible death and rises from the grave. He reveals himself after the

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resurrection and invites his children to go and follow. He promises a real return to collect up all of us who belong to Him. The point is, that these are all works which flow from *outside of ourselves*. These are God's *historical* actions toward us-. Our salvation does not start within ourselves. The knowledge that saves is the personal knowledge of the historical Jesus who lives and is Savior and Lord.

In Christianity the greatest miracle on earth is not that a person should give up a life of self-pity and turn toward a life of self-esteem. Rather, the greatest miracle is the real emergence of Jesus from real death and the real hope that this same blessing is ours too, through faith. Making a decision and changing one's ways is powerful, but not miraculous. It happens every day. The resurrection of Jesus was a real miracle, not a figure or an allegory (Another heresy. For that matter, Elijah's raising of the widow's son, Elisha's raising of the Shunammite's son, and Jesus' raising of Lazarus are facts not figures.) This is the keystone affirmation of faith. Reality is not an allegory, and allegory cannot encompass reality. Allegory can be used to express truth, but not to define it. Allegory can, at best, only articulate ideas, and ideas alone cannot save us even though our lives can be made better or worse by

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them. Anyway, the transition from death to life is not a mere rediscovery of our godlikeness, but the reimposition of God's likeness by way of the purity of Christ through faith.

Yes, in Christianity decision is crucial (crucial = at the cross). One's decision for Christ is a contract of obedience. We commit ourselves to seek and respond to God's will in our lives. We agree, indeed we seek, to trust and obey. We then can rightfully claim the restoration of our place in the Kingdom of God. Our self-esteem is restored in full as a *new gift* of God. This is different from elevating our inherent worth to a position of supreme rarity. Simon's memo speaks of the power of choice as an original endowment of God to facilitate one's fashioning one's self as he pleases. That is not the revelation of God. It might be the wisdom of the ages of men, but in Christianity, choice is for choosing God. As already noted, free-will directed at one's own self-fulfillment is precisely the essence of rebellion.

Simon's affirmation of the wisdom of the ages also troubles me. Much of the wisdom of men is contrary to the revelation of God. No one likes to synthesize ideas more than I, but there are real differences in the philosophies in Simon's repertoire and the revelation of Scripture. Simon's



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reverence for the mind of man as God's greatest creation gift, is idolatry until that mind is placed in submission to a real and active God that is not one's own self.

In Christianity, evil is real. Simon does not seem to have any concept of evil except the tragedy which flows from man's lost self-esteem. Real evil wants nothing more than to have us absorbed in our self-discovery. Satan even relishes charity and kindness, if it serves to keep us from taking authority over evil.

The Memo from God speaks of the second coming as the reawakening of an individual to his own worth. The resultant joy and blessing is a repeat of that which was endowed at conception. But in Christianity, Christ's second coming is much more than this: it is the final victory of God over rebellion (evil). In the final analysis, Simon's gospel is not such good news. It is hardly news at all. And it has no power beyond our own power of self-persuasion. As great as positive thinking might be, it is a poor substitute for the active and willful participation of God Almighty in our human affairs. The view of Simon has no place for and no equivalent of the Holy Spirit. In Christianity God is still with us as counselor, guide, comforter and as the source of God's power to

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carry His gospel to all the world.

"Bill, stop!" I heard that. I guess I might never stop if someone didn't cry out. To summarize: *The problem is sin, not ignorance; salvation is imparted, not discovered within; one is saved by a knowledge of Jesus as Lord, not a knowledge of one's rarity and potential; evil, like sin, is real, not allegorical or a mere consequence of ignorance; God continues His presence with us as Holy Spirit, not as daily self-persuasion; Christ's second coming and final victory is eminent and will be as historical as was the first, not a second awakening to a forgotten self-esteem.*

If you stop to think about it, most religions purport that the problem of the human condition is ignorance and the answer is knowledge. Simon's is such a formula.. It is a "Gnostic" formula: one is saved by what one knows. Gnostic philosophies, ancient and modern, share this formulation. In them there is a secret, some fragment of truth or some set of teachings, which empower the "knower" to be retrieved from their unhappy situation. To avail themselves of the power of this gnosticism, they must rehearse their secret, in ritual fashion and often, guarding the secret until potential converts are "ready" to believe. The early Christians struggled against the Gnostic heresies for centuries; and

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the seeds of that struggle are implicit in the New Testament.

Eastern religions (popularly called "new age") also have a "salvation through knowledge" formula, somewhat revised. There is not a select secret, but the coming to know oneself, deeply and mystically, leads to a "knowledge" or joining with a godhead. One can see the spiritual "evolution" theme here. In our modern day, these two notions are often seen running together. (Simon's gospel is more Gnostic than eastern it seems to me because he does not indicate a growing into power, but rather he emphasizes an uncovering of power.) The problem with eastern religions is that the godhead is passive with regard to human experience; the power gained is under the human's direction; the power is implicit to the cosmos; God is out of the picture as an active player. In both cases, a mantra or meditation ritual is the process used to gain access to this growth. This 100 day ritual in which one is to recite the mantra of the Memorandum from God is suspect to me. Christian meditation ends in *revelation*. Revelation is better than self-control. This is underscored by the pin and swatch. Jeepers! An actual badge, a secret symbol of membership (and this without a persecution to justify it).

## Letter to Candice: on Gnosticism

The only alternative to the ignorance/knowledge religions which are human-centered, is the sin/redemption religions which are God-centered. Of these latter there are only TWO: Judeo-Christian religion and Islam ( I shall have to distinguish these two another time; for now, Islam is a mockery of Christianity; sin without the active redemption of Christ). It is this which makes Christianity incompatible with all other religions. The insistence on the Sonship of Christ, and trinitarian notions which keep God involved as an active player in our experience, will not allow us to sink into the comfortable regions of our own self-worth, however blessed they seem. While human-centered religions can be aligned together, Christianity must be kept distinct. AND NOTE THIS: while human-centered religions can be accepting of a wide range of beliefs, they are *intolerant* of a Christianity which is faithful to the judgment of God and the objective Lordship of Jesus Christ. Similarly, while Christianity cannot accept as equivalent a wide range of beliefs, it must be *tolerant* of all beliefs because it has no need to absorb them. It is a strange reversal. Christianity is cast as intolerant because it will not grant the equivalence of all faiths but rather, seeks to convert the lost; one can believe anything, but apart from Christ they'll be wrong and

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foolish, and the power of sin and evil will be unbroken. Conversely, human-centered systems cannot tolerate Christianity since to do so violates the one uncompromisable tenet of faith - equivalence. Once again the Christian is placed at odds with world, as it is written.

Enough . . . . for now.

## Letter to Candice: More on Gnosticism

Candice,

I'm afraid I don't have time right now for a lengthy reflection on The Return of the Ragpicker. But I did want to keep up my end of the "bargain."

Mr. Mandino must surely be an easy man to like. One cannot help but feel good - about his values, his success, his relationship with his wife, his child-likeness with regard to Simon, his love for simple natural beauty and history, and so on. God has indeed given us such capacity for all these things. Not the least of these is a capacity for success and overcoming failures and hurts. Mankind does have his own store of resources to develop and apply toward achievement and happiness. I do not quarrel (much) with Mr. Mandino's advice about how to succeed. I can even appreciate the positive impact of rehearsing one's goals, self-discipline, forgiveness of self and others, and focusing on each day, etc.

Mr. Og has discovered, I think rightly, that all help, even self-help, has a religious origin. Somehow one's loftiest ideas about life always end up carrying a religious connotation - by virtue of one's zeal for it if nothing else. It is at this point that I become guarded. Simon's gospel of success - personal, social, political, ecological - is profoundly religious.

## Letter to Candice: More on Gnosticism

Simon cannot help but make religious statements about the ultimate realities. He encourages people to accept whatever spiritual comfort might come to them from any source while looking to themselves for the secret of long-life, success and happiness. This is that human-centeredness I spoke of in the first letter (cf.). Jesus is hardly mentioned at all, God only occasionally, and always as a kind of divine love-principle or "helper" in and among other great teachers - never as Judge or Lord in any sense that implies preeminence or commands obedience. The Christian elements becomes allegorized and absorbed (again, see first letter).

I must move on.

Mr. M, ostensibly, is writing a kind of autobiography. I do not know if the details of his life are at all as portrayed, but they are presented as true to his experience. Regardless, Simon is a mystery (or one of the signs and wonders requisite to faith? John 4:48). He comes and goes, and leaves a trail only in the life of Mr. M. (almost). I'm sure the thought occurred to you as to me that Simon was a kind of guardian angel or even a Christ-figure (allegory of Christ), not really human at all -quite. In the end Mr. M has Simon leave his trail for Bette too! It troubles me that

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he broke the veil of "just-for-you"-ness and brought an objective party into the witness at Simon's death. Had Simon lived up to his resolve not to involve Bette, one could have left Simon in a role more like an alter-ego of Mr. M's. - a literary device to keep interest and heighten the drama. But couched within a "real" history, this phantom figure commands faith by virtue of the mystery which shrouds him. And the warmth and love he shows, and the pathos of his dying, lulls one to delete any caution.

Now, Candice, I may come off sounding a little kooky, but I believe there are grounds for some serious caution. Mr. M. certainly would not intend it, and would surely laugh at my suggestion, but Simon may be more of a spirit guide or an evil spirit than angel. I believe Christianity requires the existence of an independent principle of evil which Simon reduces to nil and replaces with mere ignorance. Satan deals in deception. The objective is to keep people from entering into a submissive relation to God in Jesus Christ. Scripture refers to Satan as an angel of light. Any teaching, however sweet and enlightening it may be, which serves to take one's eyes off of Jesus is to be rejected. And remember the devil's first and perennial lie, charming and persuasive, is that *knowledge of good and evil* makes one like God (read, relieves one of



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any need for God). It does not help to slip God in there occasionally, to repeatedly say "with God's help" in your manifesto, or to give Jesus honor as a great teacher along with Zoroaster, Confucius or Thoreau (hardly Christian philosophers). This co-eminence (to coin a phrase) or equivalence I spoke of before, salves our religious consciences while undermining the pre-eminence of Christ.

As a giver of advice toward success, perhaps Mr. M. has earned his credits, but as theologian (a territory he has staked out for himself, not I) he has not. Of course, one is under no obligation to be Christian. As an alternative to Christianity, this . . . today's the day, keep cool, save the planet, love your neighbor, save the children, stop the violence, golden rule, be kind, second mile, set goals, keep dreaming, strive for the best, don't quit, . . . philosophy seems common-sensical and is obviously popular. It is just that I must distinguish it from Christianity. Even such a compassionate philosophy cannot compare to the supernatural work of God in Jesus and the personal relationship I have with Him.

Well, see there! Inevitably longer than I intended, but the words flowed so freely I just couldn't stop. I hope they bless you. I loved writing them.

# General Letters

## *Issues and Culture*

## Letter to Marvin: on Evolution

Dear Marvin,

I've begun to write a collection of what I call *Letters of Testimony*. They constitute essentially a self-possessed journal or observations and critiques on life which make application of my faith. I fancy that one day these will be published and make someone some interesting reading, perhaps even shedding some light upon life's deep gray tones. As you shall see, you attracted my gaze and thus provide me a person to share with on *your* chosen subject: evolution. It's one of my favorites, and there are none more indicative of our current apostasy. I appreciate your insight and your sense of responsibility. I have only a thought or two to add which may help in future.

There is certainly no way to construe evolution as *fact*. As you pointed out, evolution as scientific hypothesis is being rapidly outrun by the facts. Nothing is *a fact* that is unsupported by the facts. That new species emerge from old ones as the result of random mutations is insupportable by scientific inference. There may still be those who maintain that such random change might be occurring, but the rate of the emergence of new species is not discernibly different from zero and thus removes evolution from the running as an account of the wide

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variety in the biological world. In *fact*, by every observation, it appears that species are being lost at a discernible, and to some people, an alarming rate. The emergence of new species is losing the battle with attrition by default.

This devotion to evolution is so pernicious precisely because it is not science. C.S. Lewis calls evolution a myth (only he uses a large "E"). As mythology, evolution is more philosophy than science. As philosophy, evolution speaks of how things *improve* more than just of how things *change*. Indeed, precisely because evolution is about origins and purpose, it is more theology than mere philosophy. Evolution, the myth, is a doctrine about the inevitable *progress* of things, a tale of how unlikely events prevail against all odds to produce *improvement*. In this myth, except for the occasional local setback, progress is inevitable and intrinsic to the cosmos. The myth applies in every domain of life, not just biology. Technology is getting better, the economy is getting better, education is getting better, societies and nations are getting better, morality is getting better, religion is getting better . . . On and on it goes, the universe plodding toward perfection. It all hangs on the notion of something *better*; and nobody really knows what that is. It's a moving

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target - today is good compared to yesterday, but bad compared to tomorrow. Where does it end? Who knows? More to the point, who cares? It's progress! And there it is, that perniciousness: if science does not support the myth, science will be ignored, because it is a religious thing, *i.e.* the *doctrine of random improvement*.

For some people, learning that evolution is bad science may be the beginning of an examination of their whole world view, but for people who are baptized in the notion that positive change is inevitable - and that without any source of goodness to direct it - all the refutations of science will leave them barking the same tired liturgies in protest.

None of this, of course, appears to be an argument *for* special creation. That was not even the intent, but that evolution fails its own test doesn't mean that special creation is true. This, after all, is the debate. Both Evolution and special creation are mythologies about origins. And since origins are not available for direct observation, who is to say which is right? This notion of equivalence is the sticking point. It is a cultural fight over starting assumptions which cannot be proven, it seems likely that the celebrants of the two world views are doomed to the struggle.

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Still there is one unsettling bit of logic, if you're an evolutionist. If not evolution, then what? Evolution was endorsed as religion precisely to offer an alternative to the God premise. If the world did not just emerge, if life did not just emerge, if progress is not inherent, then what? There's that irritating truth function: if design, then designer. If goodness (and thus betterness) is not defined from inside the system, then, oops, there's that creative goodness-definer.

True, science cannot *prove* either evolution or special creation ever happened, but science can prove that evolution isn't happening (creation need not be continuing). Evolution establishes an empirical test - new species are measurably emerging or there is a visible process from which it can be deduced - and then fails to supply supporting facts (the fossil record is most uncooperative in failing to produce the much touted "links"). As an explanation for the complexity and variation of nature, it fails its own test. Creationism, on the other hand, makes no claims regarding gradual emergence, this being the defining difference. The assertion of creation that is subject to scientific verification is the means by which a rapid presentation of created things can account for the apparent changes in the physical world. The challenge to special creation

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is to reconcile to an old-seeming world. Essentially this is done by an appeal to degeneration, as in the Second Law of Thermodynamics (Entropy). Change is degenerative. This is where the theoretical sciences about catastrophic changes, which you cited, are relevant to the debate. I would refer any reader there for more discussion.

Science may not be up to the task of arbitration. That science should decide such truth is an assumption often questioned. It is a mistake to put science in such a critical place. Science may have a chance at being a standard of truth in an evolving world, but in a created world, it cannot compare to the truth as known by the implied creator. The Bible, for example, presents as revelation. Whether one affirms the Bible as divinely inspired or not, in a created world, revelation is still a possibility. Evolution cannot appeal to a revealed source of truth since truth is unknown and emerging. But Creation can make such an appeal. In a created world, the Creator who endowed creation with the potential for written language can communicate that way if he wants. In a created world, science can remain interested in the creation, but in an evolving world, science must concern itself with ultimate reality; the lines between science and

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religion become blurred once again.

What's important about this is not what clues the creation scientists can extrapolate and pursue within the scientific disciplines. Rather, what's important is that the revelation of Scripture, which just may be true, speaks more of goodness and man's moral condition than it does of science. Scripture warns us that those who deny God will do bizarre intellectual things which are so much foolishness to the mind of God. He who worships a void will fill it with foolishness. At the level of mythology, evolution serves to displace theistic world views. That's really its function. That's why it's so hard to dislodge. If not evolution, then God! And if God, then I'm not free to do as I please. If truth is objective and finished rather than emerging, then I cannot worship change as improvement. Science can handle the clash of hypotheses about change. To handle the clash of doctrines about truth, goodness and progress requires theology - and very probably, revelation.



## Letter to Zoe: on Blissful Ignorance

Dear Zoe,

I have become a writer of letters, especially on those occasions when some particular doctrinaire expression escapes detection in the popular culture. For over a year I have observed the approval of an Academy Award winning movie, *Forest Gump*. I had heard many of my friends, including yourself, and much of the popular media, refer to the film as a favorite, perhaps the best of all time. The members of the Academy certainly approved of it.

Now, to be sure, it is likely that few of these celebrants are making a very thorough philosophical statement in their approval. It's easy to be uncritical, philosophically, when dealing with what is supposed to be *mere* entertainment. I am reminded of the many times when I have been chastised for making too much out of things. I've often been asked, "why can't you just enjoy the thing and not be so critical"? And I suppose I might.

But I can't. It matters, certainly to me, that our culture is so without direction that it appears to miss these kinds of statements, leaving them unchallenged while they take cover behind good technical production values and charming characterization (in this regard, the

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movie was very good indeed). And, I cannot shake the dreadful suspicion that the objections are so few and the praise so great precisely because the philosophy and values portrayed are a valid echo of those of the critics.

*Forest Gump*, the movie, has a simple thesis: "life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what your going to get." This is a declaration of the randomness of experience, a feather on the breeze. The question of destiny is addressed at several points in the film, and the conclusion is mixed. One just cannot know whether life is destiny or accident, or both. Lieutenant Dan would embrace his destiny with death, and then find peace in association with Forest. Jenny moves randomly toward death and finds her peace in Forest's affirmation of herself once her "destiny" is sealed, and seeks the legacy of child with Forest. Forest's Mama is piloted by her love of her son and her determination that his slowness won't hold him back, while herself most articulate of the confusion about destiny. Everybody is confused.

No matter one's stance toward destiny however, there is one ray of hope: blissful ignorance, innocent stupidity, charming dumb-luck - that feather, landing graciously at Forest's feet and creased into his children's

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book. Forest doesn't know about any of these things. He's too simple to make much meaning out of life. He just stumbles through - and always to good fortune - or so he remembers things in his anecdotal narration. How do you deal with existence? Don't ask so many questions. Just run when you feel like it and expect good things lost to come back to you.

But innocence only goes so far - as far as Jenny's grave. It is there that even Forest Gump has only questions, grief and no tomorrows. Jenny has gone away once and for all. He leaves her grave with a final declaration of his limitless willingness to take care of her. Even Forest is brought, in the end, to nonsense. He returns to live the rest of his life in devoted service to his son, the feather returned to the wind, released from the innocence of the father, the next generation. And what was it that really happened to Jenny? She said she had a virus that nobody understood and there was no cure. In our time, and hers, how can this be a reference to anything except AIDS? And if so, then what was almost surely Forest Gump's final destiny? And what of that of their son? AIDS is a ruthless, relentless high testimony to randomness and death in a world without meaning. In such a world, naivete is a fragile refuge. "And that's all I have to say about that."

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I thank God that we can know better. Forest didn't know anything about God, except in some strange turn of phrase about peace with respect to Lieutenant Dan. The Grace of God in Jesus Christ is real, rich and endless. As the popular evangelistic slogan says, "Christ is the answer." Why should we idolize the philosophical void which is *Forest Gump*? But we do. Is that trivial?

## **Letter to the Presiding Officer: on Issues and Church Polity**

Dr. N.

I welcome you in the name of Christ. I cannot envy the challenges you face, and I would have you know of my prayers for you as you rise to meet them. There is a matter of particular concern to me which prompts my writing to you. I refer to an excerpt of a summary of your remarks at our Denomination's recent assembly. To the extent that it does justice to your thoughts and intentions, I would offer some opinions of my own. I do want to be fair and understanding, but there is a side I must take.

Actually there are three corollary points that I feel I must lift up to you:

(1) labeling parties in a "debate" according to characterological terms is divisive and fallacious, (2) homosexuality is contrary to biblical teaching and we must be careful of any "logic" which alters such clear teaching, and (3) the ideal of tolerance must not be corrupted by an unnecessary competition to claim an unofficial record.

The regrettable term "some malodorous elements" is potentially inflammatory in context of an appeal to loving acceptance and reconciliation in a dividing church, especially since, as some have suggested, I might be a member of the element to which referred. The

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meaning of diversity is itself diverse. I treasure the openness bread into me by our Denomination. I thrill to the sharing of the grace of God with persons of all social and cultural kinds, in worship, praise, prayer, communion and service. Diversity, as such, is not difficult to deal with. To be sure, we should work for church unity and minister to the hungry, homeless and oppressed people everywhere (no so much as *purpose*, but more as the *means* of introducing God's grace in Jesus Christ, our true purpose).

But I am having difficulty accepting what many who use the word "diversity" intend by it: *that the righteousness of God is proper material for the editorial hand of men*. The legitimization of homosexuality, abortion, and the generally licentious life-styles of our time is not properly called diversity (a contrast of ways), but rather *perversity* (a deviation from established standards). The love of Christ for those of us who have been touched by these "choices" in our culture is to be distinguished from the sanction of the perversity itself. We dare not endorse life-styles and choices which fly in the face of God's best articulation of His own righteousness. We *should* resist (name-calling notwithstanding). The "intolerant" (uncompromising) element has not crept into the church; it

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seems the line between diversity and perversity has shifted and positions appear to have changed while standing in place. Not all of us who care about keeping a clear view of righteousness are bitter, narrow, intolerant and maladjusted. If the church continues on its road to identifying with perversity in the name of accepting diversity, there will be division, it is inevitable. The church's divine assignment is not to reconcile a bitterly divided and fragmented world to itself. Rather, its assignment is to reconcile a rebellious world to a righteous, loving God.

Tyranny comes in many forms and is not beyond any of us. The callous and intellectually lazy scourges (epithets) of "intolerance", "bigotry", "injustice" and the like, used to tear and disgrace one's adversaries from the debate, are as tyrannical if false as that to which they refer if true. For this time of crisis to pass into renewed unity in the church, the reconciliationists and the tolerance merchants are going to have to come up with some meaningful and biblically compatible notions of truth, sin and righteousness which their antagonists can accept. This is a tall order for mere men. The positions are near antitheses. Not even diversity can encompass antithesis. Divergence, antithesis' cousin, is more akin. And if so, then divergence and division must surely be

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siblings. The institutionalization and sanction by the church of sin as a means of achieving harmony is fraudulent and self-serving. And when the ideals of unity and harmony in diversity are elevated above all else, even the righteousness of God, they become tyrannical.

Which is greater, unity or purity? Harmony or holiness? Acceptance or sanctification? Clearly God intends both. But the "sides" of this current debate are divided, committed and, yes, uncompromising. The debate was endurable until the voting began. Please don't misunderstand, times come when it is important to stand and be counted, but I contrast these "sense of the assembly" questions with such times. The tradition of our Denomination is to tolerate divergent opinion about all but the essentials of faith. Once what was being said to the Church by some of those assembled there began to be militant in its use of formal opinion to promote their agenda, a large element in the Church became disenfranchised. And the issues are too close to their hearts to be abandoned in the name of harmony. In the same way that the one faction feels compelled to best the other in a vote fight, a moral obligation on the part of those so characterized is created not to abandon the field.

I am not opposed to the Church acting out its conscience. Surely



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we should hear the views of our brothers, develop what we can of trust, sift ourselves out and fight for our culture according to our convictions and faith. But let us not create within the Body of Christ, winners and losers at an artificial ballot box, representative or not. Voting on articles of faith must become an act of intolerance of someone by someone. Until such time as we have once again reclaimed our proper prostrate posture before the Lord, we had best stop using the mechanisms of church polity, however "unbinding" they are in footnote, to tyrannize our opponents and engineer our version of victory.

It is not my desire to raise the euphemized stink. I did not *creep* into this Denomination; I was *born into* it and *nurtured* by it. To the extent that I am in the decried element, I must take and then forgive the offense. To the extent that the assembly's actions represent any "sense" of that assembly in which I am represented, I must resist. It does not represent me.

## Letter to Bob: on Religious Liberty

Dear Bob,

I want to thank you and your congregation for the fine fellowship my son is enjoying there. And I appreciate being on your mailing list.

A year ago I read an editorial piece in your newsletter which interested me. I was moved to write a response, which I recently rediscover, undelivered! I enjoy a good debate and was absorbed by the column in the newsletter entitled *The Judge is Wrong*, about the Alabama Judge's display of the *Ten Commandments* on his courtroom's wall. I thought I might just as well send it along, since the issue is still open in Alabama and still relevant in general. I thank you for your encouragement to tell you "what [I] think."

There is a kind of reflex today to take offense at the obstinacy that Judge M has displayed by not removing the Ten Commandments from his courtroom. It is "common wisdom" to see such religious expressions by "government" officials as a violation of the "wall of separation of church and state." Still, I support the Judge's stance. What troubles me is the church's willingness to adopt the "logic" of the secular world without more rigorous critique. Hasty opinions are more dangerous to both church and state than the Judge's resolve. If the church is to

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witness in the political arena, this too must be informed by the superiority of Christ.

Let's be clear about the proposition. *It is asserted that permitting a judge to display the Ten Commandments in the courtroom is intimidating or coercive of those who do not share this religious persuasion and threaten everyone's free exercise of religion and expression.* Rev. L's indictment of Judge M was quick and decisive. Judge M is wrong. His reasons are two: it's not his courtroom, and the state must be neutral in all religious matters. In his brief format his argumentation is scant, referring to the First Amendment uncritically and giving an anecdote of persecution in Utah. Almost parenthetically I would ask what violation there is in standing before an honest man for judgment. Any sense of intimidation must derive from either one's guilt (would we want it otherwise?), or the suspicion, if innocent, that the Judge's religion may find guilt where there is none. In either case, the issue pertaining to the Judge is the propriety of his decisions, not his religion.

To begin with I would dismiss the notion that the courtroom is not Judge M's. Technically, the courtroom is nobody's. It certainly does *not* belong to everybody. The courtroom is the domain of the ideal of justice

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and the practice of law and is in a very meaningful sense independent of all (human) ownership. But there is another meaning to possession which does not connote ownership, and that is stewardship. We Christians understand that concept, as do cultural activists for many causes. Judge M certainly does have a courtroom which is his to care for. He does have authority in that place. It is precisely the limit of that authority that is being discussed. To say, as Rev. L has said, that as a steward Judge M's authority is limited ("it's not his courtroom"), does not logically require that his decision to retain the Ten Commandments in his courtroom is inappropriate. That conclusion would be circular: he shouldn't because he shouldn't.

Additionally, I feel I must also dispense with the allusion to the Mormon treatment of the school children as analogous to Judge M's position. Analogy can be a good device for illustration, but as a logical device it is fallacious. The response to the coercion in the Mormon school is an emotional one (outrage, disgust, *etc.*). Our response is no less emotional for its propriety, and appeal to emotion is a logical fallacy too. The presence of the Ten Commandments in the courtrooms is in no way connected, causally or logically, to the abuses of the teacher in Utah. I am

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concerned that by reducing this kind of issue to an emotional, "put yourself in their shoes", argument, we lodge the matter squarely in an emotional domain, out of the reach of reason, especially when they are different shoes and they don't fit. Were the Judge's rulings found to be prejudicial, and that because of his religious views, the analogy may then have some merit. I think it cogent to suggest that adopting any logic that separates religious expression from governance is to define Secularism as the official State Religion, and should give every devotee of Jesus pause.

Having said all this, it is mine to give good reason in support of the Judge. One approach would be to give *historical* evidences to present the nation's Christian roots and identity, and correlate dangerous social decline with the secularization of American culture. I could present the need for *absolute moral standards* like the Decalogue, connect the "logic" of "separation" to moral relativism, and argue that since somebody's values must prevail, it may as well be the biblical ones which founded the country and made it strong. Still another approach would be to establish the Decalogue as history and culture, like the Magna Carta or Hamurabi's Code, and then suggest that to remove it from our system of justice would be to revise history. These are extensive theses and many precede me in

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their promotion who are more qualified than I to make them. They are certainly worthy of consideration, but I shall defer for now and take a different approach.

Let's recall what the Ten Commandments say. The first Table says love God and worship Him. These we may rightly call religious laws. The second Table says don't murder, do honor your parents, and don't commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet. These are universal moral and ethical prescriptions and part of our civil law. What offense can be taken to their *content*? Shall a thief argue that he should not be judged by a prohibition against theft, or a murderer by a prohibition against murder? In such fundamental matters as these, it is no defense to object to the very law that defines one's guilt. Even secularists must assert the majority of these simple principles; to do otherwise is to invite fraud, assault, theft, murder and infidelity. What society can stand on sand such as this? (There are many people in our day who seem to think that honoring parents, and avoiding adultery and covetousness are principles we can do nicely without, but we have not come to the point yet of discarding the proscriptions against theft, murder and falsehood. Or have we? And to the extent that we have, how long before we implode as

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a culture?)

But what of the first Table, the affirmation of the preeminence of God and the requirements to honor and worship Him? As to content, there are no laws in our society which make one punishable for worshipping other gods, for making idols, for not keeping the Sabbath, or for wasting God's name. It is precisely this that the First Amendment is there to assure. Since, therefore, there is *no penalty* for not observing the religious law, the offense to the Decalogue must now derive solely from the fact that the first Table reminds us of its religious origins. So we come down to the first of cases: *it is not the content of the Ten Commandments that is offensive, it is rather their religious origins only which offend*. If there is any doubt, consider whether there would be any objection at all if the principles of the second Table had been displayed as part of an unnamed, untitled manifesto in that same courtroom? Could there be any objection to a judge reminding those in attendance that the prescriptions in this code are honored and respected in his court? Perhaps this would be a worthy experiment.

The news that the Judge takes an unswerving view of the responsibilities of citizens to speak truth, to respect property and life and

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to honor commitments should be comforting. How novel in our time. The only "coercion" is his proclamation that he is serious about these standards of citizenship. He is still constrained by the laws which have been written for his administration when it comes to determining guilt, innocence and consequences in each case. Objectivity, honesty, fairness, occasional mercy and a working knowledge of the law are what's important. Even the Judge's detractors in this case appear willing to grant the Judge's good character in these respects. It is maintained that he is entitled to his own personal religious opinion, and commended when that opinion underwrites his function. His character, standards and opinions are permissible. What's objectionable is how and *where* he expresses them.

And there it is, the second of cases: *persons functioning under the public trust (e.g. judges or teachers) are not to express the religious origins of their operational principles in the place of the performance of their duty.* This "safeguard" goes beyond protecting the people from tyranny and coercion, to include prohibiting any *expression* which might prepare the allegation of bias based in religion. In short, we are to believe that our society is stronger when its culture is sanitized of religious expression by



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public servants, even when there is no evidence to establish any malfeasance in performance of duty. How can this be? Is one who makes no visible expression of faith more qualified to make a legal judgment than one who does? This is a premise that needs a proof. Are we safe from the prejudice of the zealous secularist or embittered atheist merely because he doesn't reveal the source of his zeal or bitterness on the wall next to his judgment seat? How much harm has been done to our culture by "quiet revolutionaries" who have kept their philosophies to themselves while undermining our institutions? Theoretically it really shouldn't matter whether a worthy judge is worthy because he adheres to any particular persuasion. The issue in the Judge's courtroom should not be what hangs on his wall, but rather, what flows out of the man in the performance of his trust.

What is it that really drives our culture to expunge these expressions from the courtrooms? This was not an issue when the Baptists were working so diligently on behalf of the First Amendment. We're not talking about a State Church or a religious tax here. (As you know, it was in response the Baptists regarding their religious freedom that Thomas Jefferson penned the metaphor of "a great wall of

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separation.")

What then drives this challenge? It would seem that those who have taken the initiative in seeking this prohibition on the Decalogue (the ACLU), are themselves guilty of coercion and intolerance. The *possibility* or fear of religious bias, which is little affected by the prohibition, is petty compared to the very *real* restriction on expression imposed *in fact* by this ruling. Here, then, is the third case: *the prohibition on the Decalogue is religious in character and anti-theistic in its origins, or at least anti-Judeo-Christian.* This is embarrassingly transparent. Those who approve of the Decalogue itself, even those who would agree that banning it from the courtrooms somehow protects us all from tyranny, do not fear its display, as such. We are approving of the principles embodied there and friendly toward the God who is said to have originated them. Who among us would ever have brought this suit in objection? This contest is not about whether the civil principles of the Commandments are good for our culture, it is about whether the name of God is to be allowed in public parlance about these principles. The extremity which has been reached to remove theistic connotations from the law is *prima fascia* evidence that the issue is religious in character and anti-theistic.

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*Religious neutrality is a deception.* A person who is truly neutral in matters of religion must, by definition, not care one way or another about religious expression. No such person truly exists. The moment one begins to care, either to approve or disapprove, about theistic words in public parlance, that person has become religious. Humans do not need a "god" to behave religiously. Even godless philosophies field their zealots, ready to do battle with all that speaks of God. This is a spiritual conflict we are in. If one is not offended by God then what's the fuss? There is no persecution in the Decalogue's appearance in a courtroom. There most certainly is oppression when the dictates of secularism are forced into practice, not just displayed in word art on the wall.

People of religious persuasion must be free to articulate their affirmations, even when engaged in the public trust. That's true tolerance, and the real meaning of the First Amendment. How is it that we have come to a place in which we Christians would consider it wise to abandon the field of ideas, even in our public forums, to a religious, anti-theistic adversary, whose only objection to our expression is that it speaks of a God they vigorously reject? Is our faith in God so compromised, our

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aversion to ideological conflict so enlarged, that we would choose to protect men from a brush with any uncomfortable ideas about the God and Father of our Lord Jesus? And this the opinion of our own clergy? Our beliefs are about Truth and will prevail in a free exchange. Jesus never coerced anyone; he invites. God is not just an idea, He's the source of all ultimate reality, and His Son is God's manifest love and acceptance of persons of willing heart. What kind of faith can affirm all this and then enter into a truce with zealous adversaries to leave these words out of that part of our culture called government?

The real concern of Rev. L is that we lose our right to free religious exercise when we permit religious expression in the public domain (a proposition the founding Fathers would have scoffed at, understanding that you cannot separate the inner man from the public man and inviting all men into the public arena *with their religion intact*). He may say, "how would we feel", (those shoes again, but with a better fit), "if a judge were to display some favorite quotation from the *Koran* on his wall? How dreadful. We must ban them all to protect ourselves." And this is precisely Humanism's first commandment: thou shalt have no gods; and Secularism's corollary: thou shalt not speak of your gods in government.

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The official state religion thus truly becomes Humanistic Secularism. And there you have it, the First Amendment as a declaration of universal intolerance - all religious expression is not tolerated. (One need only examine the rest of the ACLU's agenda and the extent of this interpretation of the First Amendment becomes very clear: *e.g.* the prohibition of crosses and nativity scenes in public parks, of Bibles in the possession of teachers or on public library shelves, *etc.*)

Consider: Secularism is to atheism as Christianity, Judaism or Islam is to monotheism, or as Hinduism is to pantheism. Each is the cultural display (the religion) of the underlying stance with respect to God. To argue for a secular view of the First Amendment is self contradictory. Intolerant Secularism cannot agree to allow any expression in the public forum of any stance toward God not it's own, any more than intolerant Christianity can. This is why the First Amendment. To the degree that the First Amendment prohibits intolerant theistic religion, it must prohibit intolerant atheistic religion. *Free* exercise is the rule. Men who agree to free exercise of religion cannot object to those expressions when they occur. That's precisely the agreement: to tolerate religious expression not one's own. And if a Secularist prefers no

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expression as his expression, that is because he prefers no God.

The latter alternative is much simpler, and truer to the principle. Let everyone, everywhere, exercise their religion and express their views, even those (like myself) who are engaged in the public trust, and then hold everyone accountable for an impartial performance of their duties. Not even public servants should have to behave as though ashamed of their faith, just because they are at work. What better display of this principle than to allow a judge to display the Ten Commandments in his courtroom?

Well, Bob, thanks again for your invitation to respond. I expect this is more than you expected, especially at this late date. Forgive me if my style has been overbearing. I hope my thoughts are stimulating -perhaps even persuasive.

In Christ,

PS. Once again, Judge M is not accused of requiring those whose cases are heard in his court to convert to his religion, or of threatening to deny them fair judgment if they do not share his religious views. The charge is that displaying the Decalogue is a prejudice against those who

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are offended *by its religious origin*. A clearer statement of religious intolerance is not to be found.

PSS. This problem of religious expression/intolerance in public life is amplified by the size of government. The individual's Freedom of Religion in the Constitution was feasible in a world where the Government was small and disempowered to manage the lives of the citizenry. But in a collective, not so. Big Government becomes a priesthood, administering right religion to the alleged good of all (some form of "utopia"). The danger here is not that disallowing selected religious expressions might lead to the loss of individual liberty. Rather, religious liberty must first be lost before religious expression can be regulated. The future is now.