

# A PERILOUS SPIRITUAL JOURNEY: FORTY MILES OF BAD ROAD

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found their way into career service within the Armstrong empire. I was an ordained minister of the Worldwide Church of God, founded by Armstrong some 40 years earlier. As a minister and faculty member I administered rules and policies for students, some of which I did not adhere to in my own life. That irony, indeed that hypocrisy, would hit me like a ton of bricks in a few more years.

There were many rules in the one true church of Armstrongism: No pork or shellfish. No Christmas or Easter. No birthdays. No makeup or cosmetics. No voting or service on a jury. No involvement in politics. No “worldly” friends (as a young man I found ways to get around this one).

No participation or involvement in work or sports on Friday night or Saturday. During these 24 hours of “holy time” virtually nothing could be done, except go to church. No

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shopping. No television. No secular reading. No cooking. In early Armstrongism some people didn't even make their beds on Saturday, a restriction that would have been fine with the young Greg Albrecht, but my Germanic mother never bought into that one.

Armstrongism demanded three tithes: one tenth went directly to the church, another tenth was for families to save in order to observe the Armstrong version of the Hebrew holy day calendar, and the final tenth was given to the church every third year to pro-

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vide for its poor. It was largely because of these tithes that my mother and stepfather never owned a house. They never felt that they could maintain the mortgage payments in addition to their financial support of Armstrongism. They always rented, and in their later years they lived in an apartment.

As a young man I was taught that I was a special and unique kind of Christian. All other Christians were “so-called” Christians. But my Lutheran family back in Kansas, and the few childhood friends I managed to make outside of Armstrongism were confused. It seemed to them that many of the restrictions and rituals in my life fell in the Jewish tradition. Looking back now, I understand that my religion of Armstrongism was a cult based upon modified Judaism, all in the name of Jesus Christ. My journey to

**M**y mother was pouring her heart out to me, fearing that she had unwittingly been trapped by a convoluted, agonizing religious disaster. She tearfully apologized for introducing me to what later became known as Armstrongism, the legalistic and cultic teachings of Herbert W. Armstrong.

It was the 1980's, and I was a devout follower of Armstrongism, rapidly climbing the organizational ladder of his Worldwide Church of God. I was in my early 30's, married, and with two children in school. Many people “in the world” thought Armstrongism was a cult, but I knew better. I considered myself a more astute judge than my mother, so I comforted her and assured her that we were in the true church—the “one and only true church.”

At the time my mother was tearfully confiding in me, I was the Dean of Students of Ambassador College in Pasadena, California. I taught classes and served as the pastor of 500 college students, many of whom eventually



Baby Greg Albrecht and his parents, 1948

this realization was a profound and arduous one.

### The Long Detour

As I was just beginning elementary school, my widowed mother was looking for a husband for herself and a father for me, but more than that, she was looking for context and spiritual identity. I was in second grade when she married Lewis Greenwood, who became my stepfather. We all took a long detour from Christianity into the swamps of cultic religion. Armstrongism proved to be a rigid and remote outpost in the badlands of religion that gave me some haunting experiences in legalism, all in the name of Christianity and the Bible.

After their wedding, Mom and Lewis became members of Herbert Armstrong's church, then called the Radio Church of God. We moved to south Texas to be closer to a cherished family that had "adopted" my

ing me the high honor of helping them chop and pick cotton.

Although I was only in second grade, I was very much aware of my extended family's disapproval of Armstrongism. My relatives were always tactful about my mother and step-father's strange new beliefs, but even as a seven-year-old boy I could sense their displeasure and sadness.

I spent the next 35 years of my life up to my neck in this specific religious swamp, in what I have now come to see, by God's grace, as *40 Miles of Bad Road* (with apologies to Duane Eddy, who back in the day had a hit record by the same name). I attended second and third grade in Rosenberg, Texas, and then we moved to Pasadena, California to be at the world headquarters of Armstrongism and its Ambassador College. I grew up in southern California, receiving the best indoctrination Armstrongism could give, in both elementary and secondary school as well as Ambassador College.

Assigned as a student to Armstrong's college campus in England, I met and later married my wife Karen, whose family has its own story of becoming hijacked by Armstrongism. Our wedding ceremony, at our request, was personally officiated by the cult's leader, Herbert Armstrong.

In England, the rules-happy campus experience Karen and I endured was an alternative reality. We, along with a number of fellow students at Armstrong's English campus, were marching down *40 Miles of Bad Road* and deeper into the bonds of legalism.

After graduation, Karen and I married and were assigned to "the work" of Armstrongism. Our service, much like that of the military, was appointed, without regard for our preference. We remained in England, partially because, as I discovered later, several senior

leaders in the English branch of the movement weren't finished with me yet. They were, in their own way, fond of us. In their

hard-headed legalistic and cultic thinking, they felt that Karen and I needed "further training"—boot camp would have been a more accurate description.

Once it was decided that we had paid our dues, we were transferred back to the world headquarters in California in order for me to assume the much-envied position of faculty member at Ambassador College. As a young couple with two preschool-aged children, we were seen as role models who would encourage others to follow in our footsteps and be soldiers for the cause.

Apart from its devotion to old covenant Jewish requirements, its eclectic teachings about the nature of God, the myth of British-Israelism, and a host of other fables and heretical notions, the legalistic requirements of Armstrongism held many similarities to American Protestant fundamentalism. A potent strain of the holiness movement influenced Herbert Armstrong, convincing him that righteousness could be obtained by virtue of personal effort and achievement.

For all of its deviation from historical Christianity, the most toxic of all of the teachings of Armstrongism is *legalism*. One can never be good enough in Armstrongism—there is always another rule to obey, another task to accomplish, more character to build, and another personal problem or secret sin to overcome. *Never good enough*—it's the theme song of **Bad News Religion**.

### The True Believer

Legalism is the common virus that affects all of **Bad News Religion**—whether it is a cultic movement that claims to be Christian, a Christian church that adheres to the essential teachings of Christianity, or a religion that claims no affiliation to Jesus Christ whatsoever. Legalism is the common ingredient. Be more righteous. Be better. Work harder. Give. Serve. Qualify. Improve. Do more. Where the gospel of Good News offers hope and redemption, **Bad News Religion** supports self-condemnation and despair.

My experience with cultic legalism has heightened my sensitivity to this watering down of the gospel, this pollution of God's amazing grace. Why do so many continue to fall for the trap of legalism? **Bad News Religion** is both popular and successful because legalism is a part of the human condition. It causes us to obsess about being right. The more we are convinced that we are right, we gradually change the



Loma and Herbert Armstrong in the early days of "The World Tomorrow," his Radio Church of God radio program.

mother and me: my mother's oldest sister Esther, her husband Alvin, and their four children. My cousins shared the endless adventures available on their farm with me, even giv-

emphasis of the gospel from “change me” to “change them.” It’s the default to which we humans revert. It’s the way we are programmed. It makes sense, but is the diametric opposite of biblical teaching.

I continued my journey deeper into **Bad News Religion**, and by the early 1980’s, Karen and I had been judged to be worthy of continued advancement in the hierarchy. By the time my mother apologized for her role in placing her grandchildren and me in this “mess,” I had moved up the ranks.

Exclusive and elitist teachings and practices characterized my life as I moved up the ladder from a foot soldier to a leader in a religion that called itself Christianity. I did not realize at the time that I had become the nemesis of true, good news Christianity. I lacked joy and grace; I was a narrow, judgmental, hypercritical, fault-finding slave of **Bad News Religion**.

Within a few years, after I rejected my mother’s plea to leave the cult of Armstrongism, my neatly ordered world started to crumble, triggered by an unforeseen tragedy.

In August 1985 my mother, along with my 13-year-old son, traveled back to Texas to celebrate my Uncle Alvin and Aunt Esther’s 50th wedding anniversary. On the way home from a celebratory dinner my mother was killed in an auto accident, along with the very ones celebrating their fifty



The wedding of Greg and Karen Albrecht, performed by Herbert Armstrong, 1969

and his death marked the lifting of his direct influence in my life. While I was close to Herbert Armstrong, I worked even more closely with his chosen successor, Joseph Tkach. Within a few years after Armstrong’s death, I started to see and experience God moving in the lives of Joseph Tkach and a few other close friends, as well as in my own.

I was beginning a long journey out of the religious badlands.

### The Difficult Journey Out of the Swamps

As I grieved my mother’s tragic death, I recalled her claim that we were in a cult. At that time of grief and loss, God was using personally devastating experiences to conclusively demonstrate to me that I could never be good enough to qualify for salvation. Within a year or two it seems that God launched a rescue mission for me, and for that matter, many others within what was then known as the Worldwide Church of God. Looking back on those dark and painful days, there is no question that the road that took me out of the swamps of **Bad News Religion** was paved with God’s amazing grace.

God was opening my eyes through grief to see the bankruptcy of any system that pretends to impart righteousness through rules and regulations. In my case it took almost 35 years to learn this painful lesson—even then it was only by God’s grace that I escaped Armstrongism. Though at the time I didn’t know exactly what was wrong, it soon became ob-

vious to me that I would have to leave Armstrongism. Herbert Armstrong was dead—the one person who had so controlled my life and who had determined how I understood the world. The more I studied and prayed, the more I saw error and heretical teaching.

For some time I was upset with Herbert Armstrong. But the more I prayed, the more I believed that I could *not* place all of the blame at his doorstep. Any power he’d had over my life I had given him. I had to

look into the mirror to identify the person who bore most of the blame. I believe that God gently nudged me into the direction of seeing that wallowing in self-pity and being a victim is living in denial. I had to face myself, and it was not a pretty picture.

Now I searched for clues. As I poured myself into the study of religion, church history, theology, apologetics and the Bible, the picture of the cult I was in became increasingly repulsive. I came to see the dogmatic claims of Armstrongism—a religion that claimed to have all the answers—as bogus.

Armstrongism had given me a false identity, a goal and a future that were all illusions. But now, in the late 1980’s, each week brought more insight into the flawed and broken foundation on which I had built my religious life. I realized that my belief system was crumbling. I discovered that the house of Armstrongism had been built upon sand (Matthew 7:26-27). Just as Jesus said, it was raining, the winds were blowing and my spiritual house with its faulty foundation was collapsing.

It was my grief that challenged the assumptions and presuppositions that formed the basis of Armstrongism, to which I had dedicated my life. It was profoundly painful to admit that this version of **Bad News Religion** could not deliver what it promised. I saw it collapsing all around me.

I never knew my father, though I have always respected his memory. My mother, God bless her, saw to that. Now I came to the painful awareness that I had never known Jesus either. I was a religious professional. My entire life was based upon

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years of marriage. At the last minute, our son had decided to go home in another car with some of his cousins.

Emotionally shattered, my wife, my daughter and I immediately flew to Texas to join our son and our grieving relatives. We attended the funeral in Needville, Texas (population 600) along with most of the town, before bringing my mother’s body back to California for burial.

Five months later, as I continued to mourn the loss of my mother, aunt and uncle, Herbert Armstrong died. The cult leader was suddenly gone,

a cultic version of Christianity. And now, even though I knew the name of Jesus Christ, even though I had memorized and quoted his teachings, even though I had once taught a college class called *Life and Teachings of Jesus*, I realized that I had never personally *known* Jesus.

It was one of the many painful but true realities that started to dawn on me as Jesus entered the picture. I realized that all my life I had been an actor, just reading the script of Armstrongism. I had played the role assigned to me. Of course I hadn't thought that I was acting, but I now realized a script was all that religion, apart from God, could give me. The only thing that any religion not based on God's grace can do is to help you read your lines, obey the rules, and jump through the hoops it prescribes.

### Finding Jesus—Losing Religion

When Jesus introduced himself to me, I met the author. The author was the Jesus whose name I knew and whose teachings I thought I understood, but the Jesus I never personally



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came into contact with. The Jesus I never knew was the Jesus I taught to thousands of college students over the years. Jesus found me. I knew facts and information about him, but I had never *known* him. I was so lost I had no idea where to start looking for him. It was only through his reaching out that I was able to come to know him.

God's grace opened my eyes to the real Jesus and the real gospel. God's grace helped me get off the well-worn road map of proof texts that followers of Armstrongism use to navigate the Bible and prove their conclusions. I started reading the Bible, and when I

reached for the hand of my Savior, he helped me out of the swamplands of **Bad News Religion**. My eyes had been blinded by legalistic interpretations of what I thought the Bible taught—but now, because the gracious light of the gospel illuminated the message that had always been there, I saw the real Jesus. It was the real gospel of Jesus Christ.

Initially, the authentic gospel of God's grace made me *ashamed* and *angry*—*ashamed* because I had been lost in legalistic swamps for so long that I had no clue about the real gospel, *angry* because grace exalted Jesus and diminished me. Grace was in my face with the powerful and unequivocal message that my good deeds did not amount to a hill of beans (an idiom I learned on a farm in the Lone Star state). I faced the pathetic, ugly truth that I had no idea about what I thought I had been preaching and teaching.

By God's grace, over the course of several years, I slowly came to another painful conclusion. The spiritual reality of new life in Christ is that while he lives within us and produces his righteousness in us, we still live in this body of flesh. He gives us new life now, on this side of eternity, yet we remain confronted with the daunting challenge of the physical here and now. I discovered that my past framed the reality of who I was, and my past would always

be part of who I would be. The past had happened and it was real. It was ugly, nasty, but real.

### Reclaiming the Past

God's grace helped me to accept my past. Healthy Christians who have been touched and healed by the Great Physician are not in denial. The past is not our present, but it is a part of our lives. The past happened to me and to you, whether we like it or not. The great news is that God not only rescues us presently, he redeems our past. He uses our past and where we have been for his glory. He reclaims

all of the days of our lives for his own purpose. Part of what we are is what we used to be. By God's grace our past has been redeemed and we are raised up with Christ to new life.

Saul became Paul. Chuck Colson of Watergate became Chuck Colson of Prison Fellowship. Augustine the sinner became Augustine, mighty man of God. Martin Luther the priest became Luther the reformer. The past is a prelude. It may be painful and embarrassing. It may be ugly. It may stink (the swamps of **Bad News Religion** have their own distinctive aroma!). The past is what we were before—before Christ.

I learned that God's amazing grace will take the bad stuff of your life and transform it for his glory and his purpose. That's the amazing thing about God. He is in the rescue and reclamation business. Nothing we have done is beyond his reach. He breathes new life into what is cast off and seems good for nothing.

According to the false gospel of religious legalism, your only hope for salvation is to atone for your past by producing a lifetime of good works and meritorious deeds. Don't let **Bad News Religion** convince you that God is so mad at you that only a lifetime of obedience to religious rules and regulations could ever redeem you from your past. You will simply be exchanging one of the swamps of **Bad News Religion** for another.

### The Lethal Virus of Legalism

The spiritually lethal virus of legalism that attacks God's grace can be found in any belief system or structure that promises God's blessings in return for human efforts and performance. **Bad News Religion** is based on the conviction that if we do more and try harder we will be able to manipulate and obligate God into accepting our good deeds as at least partial payment for our salvation. The hypothesis of **Bad News Religion** is that our performance of religious duties and obedience to religious laws gains us a higher standing with God than we would have otherwise enjoyed.

Hindus have their obligatory prayer wheels and ritual cleansing in the Ganges, Muslims have prescribed daily prayers that must be given at specific times, required pilgrimages to Mecca and dietary restrictions. In primitive animism, legalism exacts its

pound of flesh in practices that demand food to be left for household spirits and compels the use of amulets to repel evil spirits.

By contrast, authentic Christianity proclaimed by the gospel of Jesus Christ is unique among all religions in that it offers a completely different dimension in our human quest for salvation. *The genius of Christianity is not its unique doctrines nor its unequaled ceremonies, but the Person of Jesus.* Because of Jesus, humans are saved from the religiosity of believing that they must save themselves by producing good deeds.

This is a dramatic difference, causing many Christians to claim that real Christianity is not actually a religion at all; it's more accurately defined as a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. That claim and definition are biblically accurate, and offer no room for the obligations and religious enslavement of **Bad News Religion**. However, the fact remains that when the term *religion* is used, authentic Christianity is included in the generic definition.

The real issue authentic Christians must face is the fact that much of Christendom has been infiltrated and even co-opted by legalism, and therefore has degenerated into just another religion. The sad truth for many is that their relationship with their legally incorporated denomination, congregation or human leadership of their church is actually far more real and significant than their relationship with Jesus. Simply claiming that we have a personal relationship with Jesus does not grant us immunity from **Bad News Religion** if we remain slaves to earthly organizations.

Authentic Christianity places Jesus as the very center and core of Christianity. According to the gospel of Jesus Christ, Jesus alone is the foundation of salvation. All salvation flows through him and from him. Because of Jesus' cross and the righteousness he produced, we are saved by grace. God's goodness and grace saves us, not our own works.

Preaching and teaching that judges Christians solely upon external actions almost inevitably leads to manipulation for the purpose of creating guilt and shame. We humans are suckers for religious con games that assure us our efforts will have a significant impact upon our salvation. A

heavy, unremitting emphasis on sin as defined by behavior is a one-way road that leads to legalism. An obsessive concentration on overcoming sinful actions expects unattainable standards of conduct and in turn sets us up for failure. Once we experience the inevitable failure, authoritarian "church discipline" applies the coup de grâce of guilt and shame. And once individuals are manipulated into a state of shame and guilt legalism has its way with them.

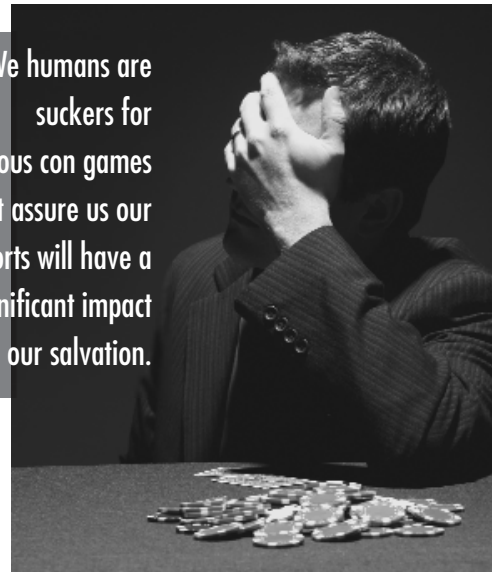
Let me put it this way—it is possible to be the church member of the year simply on the basis of conforming to all of the codes and standards of your denomination and congregation, while at the same time being filled with greed, hatred, lust and envy. Legalistic religion cannot change the heart—only God can do that. *Legalism enslaves you by convincing you of what you are already inclined to believe.* Your deeds, your power, your performance, your contributions, and your effort are capitalized upon by **Bad News Religion**. Legalistic religion beguiles you by making you feel important. Legalistic religion attacks our spiritual Achilles heel.

### Is Grace Too Good to be True?

Grace helped me see that calling oneself a Christian while insisting that the work of salvation is a combination of what Jesus did plus human accomplishment or solely the latter is a travesty and a perversion of the gospel of Jesus Christ. God's grace denies all heretical ideas and philosophies that proclaim human effort to be necessary to gain God's favor.

God's grace threatens the status quo of the world we think we have under control. If you—or people you love—are enslaved by any kind of movement, group, church or denomination that incessantly drives you to do more and more for God with your goodness and deeds—I have good news for you! If you are exhausted by futile attempts to measure up, and frustrated by endless harangues that tell you to just try

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harder—you need to look more closely at the gospel of Jesus Christ.

- If you feel like a hamster endlessly running around a wheel inside a cage in a vain attempt to conquer all of your problems so that God will love you...

- If you think that real Christianity seems to be an irrational, pathetic dog-and-pony show, much like what you have seen on television...

- If you believe that God clinically judges and records your daily performance and that your salvation is always hanging in the balance...

- If you believe that God has a giant Dow-Jones ticker-tape-like spiritual scoreboard in heaven, with angels constantly recording and updating your spiritual performance...

- If you have been convinced that God is mad at you and takes some kind of perverse pleasure in dangling your feet over the hot coals of hell...

- If you have allowed some authoritarian, charismatic pastor or leader to have influence and power over you because that person has a "special anointing"...

- If you are burned out because of unreasonable legalistic demands...

The incredibly good news is that Jesus Christ can and will make you free.

Grace is the good news that *nothing you can do will make God love you more than he already does.* And, conversely,

When Jesus mercifully took me by the hand to show me the way out of the religious swamp of Armstrongism, I thought that my battles with legalism were in the past. I found out that there are many detours that lead to the swamplands of religious legalism.



there is nothing you can do that will make him love you less.

Grace does sound too good to be true—but it is the plain truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Legalistic religion is opposed to grace, because grace will put **Bad News Religion** out of business. Christ-less religion, centered on rules and performance, is opposed to God's amazing grace.

The pied pipers of legalistic religion

seemed to be models of perfection. Even as a young pastor, I thought that God must have specially chosen some of these people who outwardly appeared to have remarkable courage and conviction, so that they could build character through their virtues and show the world by their obedience what Christianity was all about. I was impressed with these talented men and women and what they were able to accomplish. God has

the old covenant. Hebrews demonstrates that the new covenant Jesus gave is founded on better promises than the old covenant (8:6). Hebrews teaches that if there were "nothing wrong" with the old covenant, there would have been no reason for the new (8:7). Hebrews says that the old covenant is "obsolete," and—written just a few years before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem that was so central in Judaism—predicts that requirements to keep the old covenant would "soon disappear" (8:13).

The old covenant, in some form, is often the authority that churchianity appeals to in an attempt to "improve" Christianity, to "organize" God, and to make Christians "better." Hebrews explains what is important and what is not important for Christians. Hebrews leads us to authentic Christianity, distinguishing it from religion based upon externals.

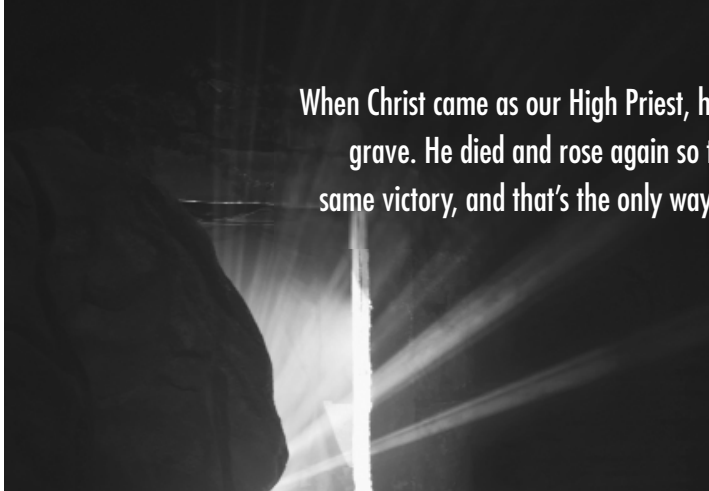
The tenth chapter of Hebrews contrasts Christ's sacrifice on the cross—and his perfect atonement for our sins—with the endless cycle of rituals and animal sacrifices under the old covenant. Christ's sacrifice is once and for all (9:25-26).

Do you realize there was one piece of furniture missing in the Jews' tabernacle and later in their temple? There was no chair. No place to rest for a moment. The lesson? The work of the priests of Israel, the priests of the old covenant, was never done. It is impossible for human beings ever to do enough things to atone for their own sins. There was not enough time in the priests' workday to offer a sufficient number of sacrifices to make the nation of Israel righteous.

Hebrews tells us, *Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God* (Hebrews 10:11-12, my emphasis).

When Jesus came as our High Priest he completed all the work that needed to be done. His last statement from the cross was "It is finished" (John 19:30). It's over, once and for all! Now it is up to us to believe that. □

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When Christ came as our High Priest, he defeated death and the grave. He died and rose again so that we too may have the same victory, and that's the only way we will have this victory.

gently directed me to see that the religious people whom I admired were just as flawed as I was and still am.

God's grace rips

will lead you into the muddy waters of despair and ruin. Don't listen to them! It is my prayer that God might use this article to open your eyes and soften your heart, to help rescue a family member or loved one who is trapped and to help you be on your guard for the lethal virus of **Bad News Religion**.

### All You Need is Grace

*"Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.... A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There's nothing you have to do. There's nothing you have to do. There's nothing you have to do."—Wishful Thinking, Frederick Buechner*

Grace is the unseen power of God at work in the lives of those who accept Jesus as sufficient and enough. Sadly, though, God's grace is often diminished or even dismissed by the external emphasis of religion.

Years ago, I remember thinking that the best and most deeply converted Christians were those who seemed to be in control of their lives, who walked straight and tall and who

the veneer off the cheap façade of religious externalism, exposing it as fraudulent deception. In fact, legalism does not permit its followers to admit to any imperfection, forcing them to live a lie. Because of the lies of legalism, many of its followers never realize that religious externalism is a delusion, the spiritual equivalent of the Emperor's new clothes.

I believe that God doesn't call the qualified, he qualifies the called. The fact is, God doesn't call anyone who is qualified—he never has. Such human beings don't exist!

### The Difference Between the Old and New Covenants

For Christians, the heart of God's amazing grace lies in the difference between the old and new covenants. The book of Hebrews contrasts the old and new covenants, continually pointing to the superiority of the new covenant in Christ. Hebrews insists that God's grace is sufficient for us; God's grace is all we need!

The book of Hebrews teaches one of the foundational lessons of real Christianity: God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Hebrews insists that Christ is superior to the religion and rituals of Judaism (or, by implication any religion) and the requirements of