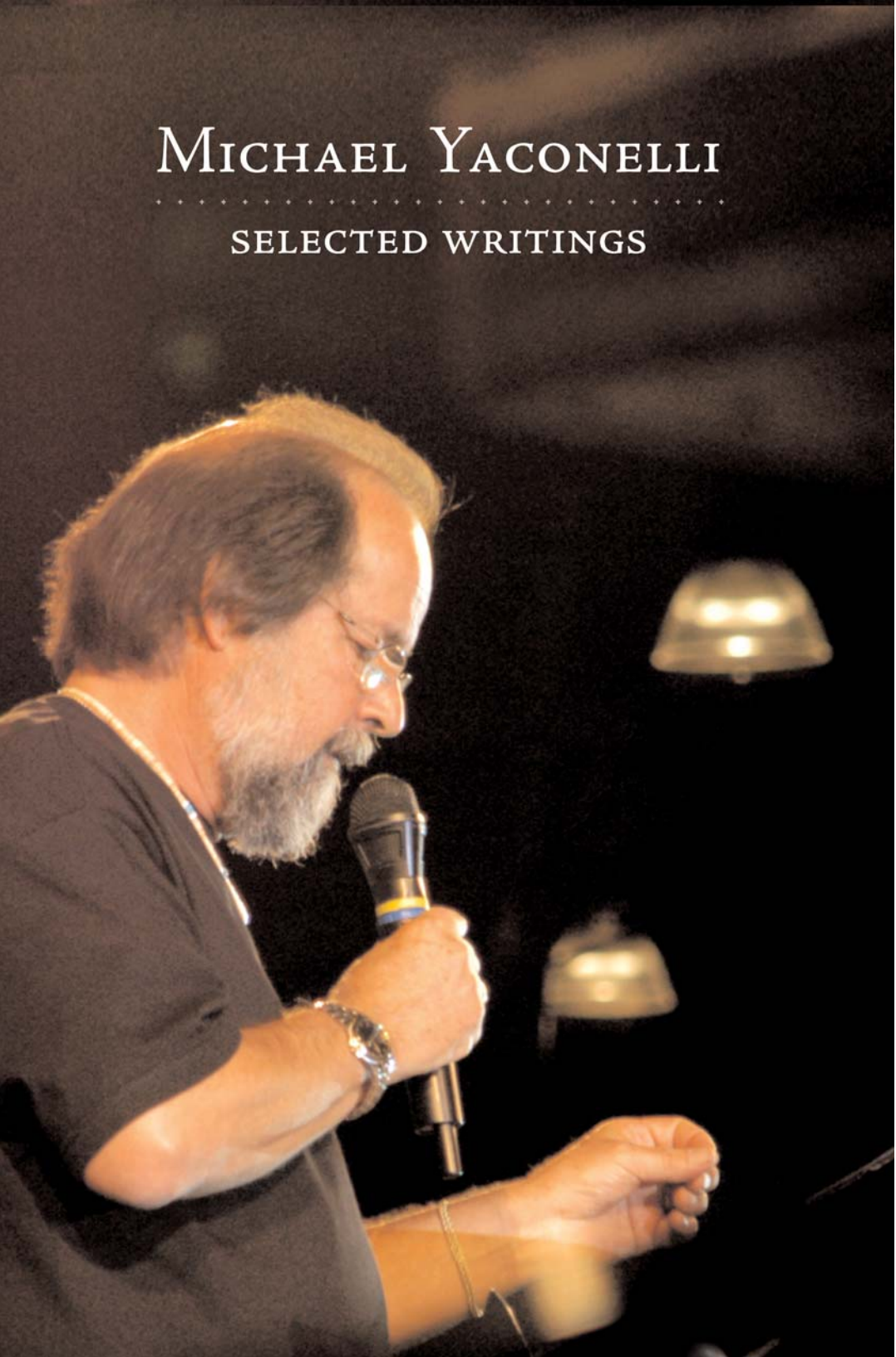
Michael Yaconelli

Selected Writings



Michael Yaconelli

Selected Writings

Excerpts from columns, books, and miscellaneous writings of Michael Yaconelli, 1942-2003.

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"Back Door" Columns

from The Wittenburg Door and The Door

1971-1996

The Terror of Inbetween-ness

Life is a kind of unraveling of the mystery of ourselves, a never-ending search for clues about the stranger that resides within. The older we get, the more complicated the mystery becomes. Our identity weaves its web into more intricate and sticky patterns. The more we know about ourselves, the less we know...and yet...yet there is, at the same time, a new kind of knowing.

I just turned 50.

Oddly, I have been thinking back to my childhood, to the day I was "born again." It was almost 40 years ago, but I can still remember that night. Up in front of the obscure Missionary Baptist Church of Santa Ana, CA, stood Pastor Johnny Womack screaming—shouting (and could he shout!) that we needed to be saved. I believed him. I wanted to be saved, and I was. Driving home in the car with my parents, my heart was filled with a peace that really did pass all understanding. It's been 39 years since that night. I am a lot more "sophisticated" than I was back then, but one thing is certain—whatever happened that night was real. It was the beginning of a glorious romp through life with God, and I

have never regretted it.

A lot of time has passed since then. A lot of water has gone under the bridge. So much has happened in my life—and in my friends' lives—in these last four decades that my faith has truly taken a beating. It's still there, but it doesn't look much like it did in those beginning years of my Christian life.

I have disappointed God so many times...and I have been disappointed by God a few times as well. There have been so many mentors—Christians who I admired greatly—who stumbled and fell, never again to recover their faith; so many "truths" about the Gospel that turned out to be false; so many casualties, so many losses, so many assumptions that turned out to be just that—assumptions, not truth.

One such assumption, in particular, has haunted me throughout all my Christian experience: the Assumption of the Changed Life. I was taught that if I was a Christian, then people would see a marked difference in my life!!! And further, I was taught that the closer I was to God—the more spiritual I was—the greater and more visible that difference would be.

I have always believed there was a visible sign of the invisible reality of conversion. I believed that Christianity changed you outside...not just inside.

I don't believe that anymore.

It is not that I don't believe that Jesus changes you, it is just that my definition of "change" has changed. Whatever the change is, it is not so much outward as it is inward. This difference that God makes is often visible only to God...and no one else. It is a new way of looking at God, a new way of understanding God, an inner new-birth that liberates us not only from sin, but from our old way of viewing God. It is intimacy rather than ecstasy; it is seeing rather than speaking; it is loving rather than living; it is dancing rather than believing; it is silence rather than sentences; it is worship rather than wordship; it is playing rather than praying; it is yearning rather than conviction; it is faith characterized more by passion than belief.

Just seeing those words frightens me. It frightens me because the words sound dangerous—like I have abandoned my faith. But I haven't abandoned my faith, I have abandoned a way of looking at my faith. Of course we change when we meet Jesus, of course we are never the same, of course people see a difference. Life is different. But what is different is different than I thought.

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The Safety of Fear

The tragedy of modern faith is that we no longer are capable of being terrified. We aren't afraid of God, we aren't afraid of Jesus, we aren't afraid of the Holy Spirit. As a result, we have ended up with a need-centered gospel that attracts thousands...but transforms no one.

What happened to the bone-chilling, earth-shattering, gut-wrenching, knee-knocking, heart-stopping, life-changing fear that left us speechless, paralyzed, and helpless? What happened to those moments when you and I would open our Bibles and our hands started shaking because we were afraid of the Truth we might find there? Barclay tells us that the word used in the Bible for "Truth" has three meanings—a word used to describe a wrestler grabbing an opponent by the throat; a word meaning to flay an animal; and a word used to describe the humiliation of a criminal who was paraded in front of a crowd with a dagger tied to his neck, its point under his chin so he could not put his head down. That is what the Truth is really like! It grabs us by the throat, it flays us wide open, it forces us to look into the face of God. When is the last time you and I heard God's Truth and were grabbed by the throat?

Unfortunately, those of us who have been entrusted with the terrifying, frightening, Good News have become obsessed with making Christianity safe. We have defanged the tiger of Truth. We have tamed the Lion, and now Christianity is so sensible, so accepted, so palatable.

Who is afraid of God anymore?

We are afraid of unemployment, we are afraid of our cities, we are afraid of the collapse of our government, we are afraid of not being fulfilled, we are afraid of AIDS, but we are not afraid of God.

I would like to suggest that the Church become a place of terror again; a place where God continually has to tell us, "Fear not"; a place where our relationship with God is not a simple belief or doctrine or theology, it is God's burning presence in our lives. I am suggesting that the tame God of relevance be replaced by the God whose very presence shatters our egos into dust, burns our sin into ashes, and strips us naked to reveal the real person within. The Church needs to become a gloriously dangerous place where nothing is safe in God's presence except us. Nothing—including our plans, our agendas, our priorities, our politics, our money, our security, our comfort, our possessions, our needs.

The two men on the road to Emmaus knew they had been with Jesus because their "hearts burned from within." The impotence of today's Church, the weakness of Christ's followers, and the irrelevance of most parachurch organiza-

tions is directly related to the lack of being in the presence of an awesome, holy God, who continually demands allegiance only to Him—not to our churches, our organizations, or our theology.

We believe in a God who wants all of us—every bit of us—and He wants us all the time. He wants our worship and our love, but most of all He wants us to trust Him. We have to be more in awe of God than we are of our government, more in awe of God than we are of our problems, more in awe of God than we are of our beliefs about abortion, more in awe of God than we are of our doctrines and agendas. Our God is perfectly capable of calming the storm or putting us into the middle of one. Either way, if it's God, we will be speechless and trembling.

Our world is tired of people whose God is tame. It is longing to see people whose God is big and holy and frightening and gentle and tender...and ours; a God whose love frightens us into His strong and powerful arms where He longs to whisper those terrifying words, "I love you."

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Reader's Digest Selves

When people look at us, what do they see? Not us. We are all secrets to ourselves. Mysteries to each other. "We are all perceptions," said William James—conclusions based on partial knowledge, reflections, pieces, impressions, opinions, but not ourselves.

The me who is reflected in this column is not me.

The you who is reflected in your written response to this column is not you. We are all edited selves—Reader's Digest versions of our real selves.

These huge gaps in our knowing one another allow us to form opinions which are always incomplete and always inaccurate. These fabrications of ourselves become the matrix of our relationships with others that leave only impressions of our real selves and paralyze our ability to know each other. By the time we weave our way through the tangle of others' misconceptions, we are so exhausted we surrender to the self that others think we are—the self we are not.

We are a mystery to ourselves, but we are lost in the dark. We know where to look to unravel this mystery, except for the great obstacle—pain. Because the pain of knowing who we are is so great, we spend a lifetime running from ourselves. We have become experts in dodging, avoiding, hiding, pretending, covering, running, protecting, eluding, escaping, averting, evading the real us. This

"Great Escape" from ourselves is the way most of us have chosen to live our lives, Christian or not, because it is the way of less pain.

That is why the "Good News" of the Gospel is so painful. Jesus wants to do much more than forgive our sins; He wants to capture our real self—and for us to face who we are. Not only is our real self full of sin, it is full of flaws and brokenness—and full of hope.

To see who we are meant to be, who we are capable of being if we will stop running and start looking, is what conversion is all about. Knowing ourselves is not a warm fuzzy; it is a frightening encounter with the tension of ourselves—who we are and who we are meant to be.

When we are truly "by ourselves"—with our self—we see what we have kept out of sight. We see what we have worked so hard to hide; we see our hopes and fears; we see the good and the bad, the positive and the negative, unedited, untouched, unfixed—the genuine self. When we have seen ourselves, really seen ourselves, we then see Christ for who He really is—our Savior.

The daily battleground of our lives, the struggle of our faith, is the facing of self, the knowing of self, that results in surrender of our self to Jesus. Surrender is not mindless recognition of the truth, a wrestling of our will with His, a humiliating admission of reality. It is embracing the truth of myself which allows me to find help and hope in the person of Jesus Christ. It is the battle of Paul in Romans, Chapter 7, and it is the battle of Mike Yaconelli each and every day.

Am I willing each day to come face-to-face with a self who wants to keep playing hide-and-seek, acknowledge my reluctance to admit who my hiding self is, and bring that shy, rebellious self into the light of Jesus who patiently shows me the self I was meant to be?

See what the battle in the Church is today? It is not abortion. It is not pornography. It is not homosexuality.

It is reality.

It is honesty.

We are afraid to be ourselves, to let ourselves be known, to come out of hiding. What the world is longing to see in the Church is not moral purity as much as moral reality. The world wants to see a Church that is made up of people who are not afraid of their blemishes, because their blemishes only point to the unblemished character of Jesus.

What we don't understand is that when people look at the Church and see only impostors, they conclude that Jesus is an impostor. But when they see followers of Jesus who are real, they see a Jesus who is real. The Church does not need to fabricate holiness, it needs to seek holiness. Holiness is not where we

arrive, but where we are going.

The power of the Church is not a parade of flawless people, but of a flawless Christ who embraces our flaws. The Church is not made up of the whole people, rather of the broken people who find wholeness in a Christ who was broken for us.

The Church points to Christ—not to ourselves.

Tough Faith

1976

The "Christ is the answer" mentality believes that somehow, some way, Christ will take care of any problem all by Himself. To raise a question thus shows a lack of faith or of understanding. It tells these people that the questioner must feel Christ is not sufficient, that God is not God. To suggest that certain areas are open to question, in their opinion, seriously jeopardizes the integrity of the gospel. There is no room for mystery.

But I believe the Bible is full of mystery. There is much about God that we don't know. That doesn't mean, however, that we're not *supposed* to know. The Bible does not say that Christ is the answer to every occurrence and condition. It says He is the Truth. And truth waits to be discovered.

To me, the center of relationship with God is discovery. What gives my faith new life and energy is the experience of finding something new about God I didn't know yesterday.

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The infinite quality of God does not deny the reality of my finiteness. God is not only a life giver but He gives all life meaning. Meaning is not simply a pleasant theological concept. Meaning suggests that what I do matters. My actions have an effect. My steps leave footprints. Evil, suffering, and even death alter my footprint and, therefore, affect my meaning.

Built into the universe is my right, my obligation to argue with death and fight evil. In fact, my very meaning is expressed in how I react to evil. God is not the author of evil and, if I am a Christian, then I'm compelled to fight evil with everything I have. I worship God because he is the giver and sustainer of life. If he were anything else, he would be worthy only of contempt.

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It seems to me that testing describes the *result* of circumstances, not the *reason* for circumstance. Therefore there are no isolated periods of testing; there are no isolated moments of testing. *All of life is a test.* Whether in disease or health, war or peace, affluence or depression, our faith in Christ is daily being pitted against the forces of evil and darkness. *All of life is a test, and how we react expresses the context of our faith at that moment.*

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Christians believe in life. We seek it, long for it, and weep when life is snuffed out. Our belief in life after death doesn't cancel our love of life before death. Death is never better than life. That's why Jesus wept at Lazarus' tomb and defied death by bringing Lazarus back to life again. Although the Christian recognizes that death is not the end, that by no means justifies the belief that life doesn't matter.

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The most important thing a Christian can do in the midst of suffering or tragedy is to be himself…there is no good or right way to face death or tragedy. There is only your way.

…The Christian does not glorify God by denying the realities of living and dying. Pain is pain whether one is a Christian or not. We cannot pretend death, sickness, and suffering out of existence. True Christianity affirms our humanity and its accompanying frailties…

Pain, suffering, and evil are ugly, difficult experiences that tax all of us to our

limits. When our time comes—and it will—all we can do as Christians is be ourselves, let God be Himself, and let Him evaluate us when it's over.

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For the Christian, there is no distinction between the sacred and secular. Everything a Christian does is an expression of his faith. He does not make choices based on the religious significance of the alternative. As a Christian he makes the choice that is a logical extension of the values he has derived from his faith…

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Peace is supposed to be one of the fruits of conversion, and it is. But does that mean, as some suggest, that the Christian has an inner tranquility and serenity that makes him oblivious to outside conditions? Does peace imply for the Christian that tragedy, evil, suffering, pain, and discouragement are unable to penetrate his composure?

Peace describes a condition rather than a demeanor. Peace is the result of salvation, which means that man and God are no longer at war. Peace describes the state of man after conversion. He is at peace with God.

Peace is not a protective shield from the battle around us. It does not make us immune to pain and suffering. Peace is not a drug which makes us oblivious to symptoms.

Biblical joy has nothing to do with our emotional state or conditions and circumstance. It is independent of all the chance and changes in life.

Joy is the description of the believers' condition, which is complete dependence on the character of God. Joy is permanent confidence in his resources and character. It's not happiness, and it's not a sentimental, superficial grin on your face. It's the unchanging quality that remains despite pain, suffering, tears, changes in fortune, and even financial collapse.

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Christ never promised that Christianity would be exciting, adventurous, or radical. He simply said it was the truth.

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The glory of the church should be that it is the one place where a person can go and not be a number, a blur in the crowd. The church is the place where each person's significance is understood and his individuality is integral to the function of the whole. The only care a church should have about its numbers is that they don't get too big.

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It seems that at some point the *amount* of things we possess is as subject to the judgment of God as what we do with what we have. The line may be different for each Christian, but there definitely must be a line.

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It is appalling how many people equate affluence with God's favor. I've heard God credited for getting new cars, new houses, new clothes, even new girl friends. What I would like to know is why God is so good at providing new cars and boats and so bad at feeding most of the world.

I think the answer is obvious. God isn't the infinite Santa Claus. God doesn't give people material abundance as a reward for serving Him. We have taken our material-obsessed mentality and tried to make the Christian faith compatible with it. That just doesn't work. Material abundance says nothing about God's blessing, and we dare not equate the two.

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The person who is really and truly not a materialist is the one who honestly feels he deserves nothing. It is the person who refuses to define life by things. It is the one who is no longer concerned with possessions and is truly free from them. It is the one who no longer cares what he has and views his possessions solely in light of their value to the Kingdom of God.

Dangerous Wonder

1998

I want a lifetime of holy moments. Every day I want to be in dangerous proximity to Jesus. I long for a life that explodes with meaning and is filled with adventure, wonder, risk, and *danger.* I long for a faith that is gloriously treacherous. I want to be with Jesus, not knowing whether to cry or laugh.

If I'm honest, most of my longings have been unfulfilled, and my living, very *un*treacherous…until a few years ago.

In 1991, my wife Karla and I spent a week in a L'Arche community called Daybreak, where the majority of the members of the community are mentally and physically challenged. Many times during our stay, people in the community reminded me of little children. They were childlike. And what surprised me was how much the L'Arche community taught me about Jesus. I shouldn't have been surprised. Matthew 18:3 describes an incident in Jesus' life when He called a little child to come close to Him and then said to the adults in the audience, "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." *It was true.* This wonderful community of people—who had *not* had their childlike attributes taken from them—gently guided me back to the place of danger and wonder.

PARK

YOUNG LIVE

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What happened to radical Christianity, the un-nice brand of Christianity that turned the world upside-down? What happened to the category-smashing, life-threatening, anti-institutional gospel that spread through the first century like wildfire and was considered (by those in power) *dangerous*? What happened to the kind of Christians whose hearts were on fire, who had no fear, who spoke the truth no matter what the consequence, who made the world uncomfortable, who were willing to follow Jesus wherever He went? What happened to the kind of Christians who were filled with passion and gratitude, and who every day were unable to get over the grace of God?

I'm ready for Christianity that "ruins" my life, that captures my heart and makes me uncomfortable. I want to be filled with an astonishment which is so captivating that I am considered wild and unpredictable and …well…*dangerous*. Yes, I want to be "dangerous" to a dull and boring religion. I want a faith that is considered "dangerous" by our predictable and monotonous culture.

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The Bible names our problem: *sin*. Don't let the word fool you. Sin is more than turning our backs on God, it is turning our backs on life! Immorality is much more than adultery and dishonesty; it is living *drab, colorless, dreary, stale, unimaginative lives*. The greatest enemy of Christianity may be people who say they believe in Jesus but *who are no longer astonished and amazed*. Jesus Christ came to rescue us from listlessness as well as lostness. He came to save us from flat souls as well as corrupted souls. He came to save us from dullness. Our culture is awash in immorality and drowning in dullness. We have forgotten how to dance, how to sing, and how to laugh. We have allowed technology to beat our imaginations into submission and have become tourists rather than travelers. Television dominates our time, alters our values, numbs us to life in all of its wildness. We have been stunted by mediocrity.

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Predictability and faith cannot coexist. What characterized Jesus and His disciples was *unpredictability*. Jesus was always surprising the disciples by eating at the wrong houses (those of sinners), hanging around the wrong people (tax collectors, adulterers, prostitutes, lepers), and healing people on the wrong day (the Sabbath). There was no Day Timer, no strategic plan, no mission statement;

there was only the eager anticipation of the present moment. The Pharisees wanted Jesus to be the *same* as they were. His truth should be the same truth that they had spent centuries taming. But truth is *un*predictable. When Jesus is present, everyone is uncomfortable yet mysteriously glad at the same time. People do not like the surprises—even church people—and they don't want to be uncomfortable. They want a nice, tame Jesus.

You know what? Tameness is not an option.

Take surprise out of faith and all that is left is dry and dead religion. Take away mystery from the gospel and all that is left is frozen and petrified dogma. Lose your awe of God and you are left with an impotent deity. Abandon astonishment and you are left with the meaningless piety. When religion is characterized by sameness, when faith is franchised, when the genuineness of our experience with God is evaluated by its similarities to others' faith then the uniqueness of God's people is dead and the church is lost.

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Do you want to be just like Jesus? The Jesus of the New Testament was a long way from dull—crying one minute and knocking over tables the next; showing courageous compassion to a fallen victim one day and cursing hypocrites the next; blasting the Pharisees one day for having such a narrow view of adultery, then on the next day forgiving a woman caught in adultery. The New Testament writers continually describe the crowds as responding to Jesus with amazement.

Jesus was a dangerous man—dangerous to the power structure, dangerous to the church, dangerous to the crowds of people who followed Him.

Shouldn't the *followers* of Christ also be dangerous? Shouldn't everyone be awed and dazzled by Christians? Shouldn't Christians be known by the fire in their souls, the wild-eyed gratitude in their faces, the twinkle in their eyes, and a holy mischief in their demeanors? Shouldn't Christianity be considered dangerous—unpredictable, threatening to the status quo, living outside the lines, uncontrollable, fearless, wild, beyond categorization or definition? Shouldn't those who call themselves Christians be filled with awe, astonishment, and amazement?

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If Jesus is the Son of God, we should be terrified of what He will do when He gets His hands on our lives; if the Bible is the Word of God, we should be

quaking every time we read its soulpiercing words; if the church is the body of Christ, our culture should be threatened by our intimidating presence. But our culture is *not* threatened by our presence; it's not terrified of the Jesus in our lives; and it's not quaking at the Word of God. Why? Because we have familiarized the gospel, sanitized it, flattened it, taken the sting and the terror out of it. We've been intimidated by those who claim to be familiar with Jesus. Whether they be preachers, teachers, or writers, these familiarizers convince us that their familiarity with God gives them a special knowledge of how and when God works. At first glance these people seem to know God extremely well. They seem to know all about God. They know the "Key to God's Will" or "How to Live a Happy Life" or "Six Steps to Maturity." Although they would never claim special status with God, one gets the impression (an impression which is not discouraged) that these ministers, teachers, and writers do have a special status with God. Their message is, "Become more *familiar* with God and the Bible; then you will know what God is up to just like we do." That message couldn't be further from the truth.

These people have reduced the gospel to a set of principles, Bible verses, moral absolutes, and theorems—as though God were some kind of mathematical problem that needed to be solved. What is implied (but never said) is that once we understand the formula, once we have determined "God's principles," then we can be comfortable because we know how God works. Which makes great sense . . . unless they are wrong.

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The grace of God is dangerous. It's lavish, excessive, outrageous, and scandalous. God's grace is ridiculously inclusive. Apparently God doesn't care who He loves. He is not very careful about the people He calls His friends or the people He calls His church. Exactly.

Messy Spirituality

2002

For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to be a godly person. Yet when I look at the yesterdays of my life, what I see, mostly, is a broken, irregular path littered with mistakes and failure. I have had temporary successes and isolated moments of closeness to God, but I long for the continuing presence of Jesus. Most of the moments of my life seem hopelessly tangled in a web of obligations and distractions.

I want to be a good person. I don't want to fail. I want to learn from my mistakes, rid myself of distractions, and run into the arms of Jesus. Most of the time, however, I feel like I am running away from Jesus into the arms of my own clutteredness.

I want desperately to know God better. I want to be consistent. Right now the only consistency in my life is my inconsistency. Who I want to be and who I am are not very close together. I am not doing well at the living-a-consistent-life thing.

I don't want to be St. John of the Cross or Billy Graham. I just want to be remembered as a person who loved God, who served others more than he served himself, who was trying to grow in maturity and stability. I want to have more

victories than defeats, yet here I am, almost 60, and I fail on a regular basis.

If I were to die today, I would be nervous about what people would say at my funeral. I would be happy if they said things like "He was a nice guy" or "He was occasionally decent" or "Mike wasn't as bad as a lot of people." Unfortunately, eulogies are delivered by people who know the deceased. I know what the consensus would be. "Mike was a mess."

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You might say Christianity has a tradition of messy spirituality. Messy prophets, messy kings, messy disciples, messy apostles. From God's people getting in one mess after another in the Old Testament to most of the New Testament's being written to straighten out messes in the church, the Bible presents a glorious story of a very messy faith.

Sounds like you and I are in good company.

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A few years ago, I was introduced to a group of uncouth Christians who call themselves "the Notorious Sinners." These are men from all walks of life who meet once a year to openly share their messy spirituality with each other. The title Notorious Sinners refers to the scandalous category of forgiven sinners whose reputations and ongoing flaws didn't seem to keep Jesus away. In fact, Jesus had a habit of collecting disreputables; he called them disciples. He still does. I like people who openly admit their notoriousness—people who unabashedly confess they are hopelessly flawed and hopelessly forgiven. Graciously, these men invited me to be a part of their group.

The Notorious Sinners meet yearly at spiritual-retreat centers, where from the moment we arrive, we find ourselves in trouble with the centers' leadership. We don't act like most contemplatives who come to spiritual-retreat centers—reserved, quiet, silently seeking the voice of God. We're a different kind of contemplative—earthy, boisterous, noisy, and rowdy, tromping around our souls, seeking God, hanging out with a rambunctious Jesus who is looking for a good time in our hearts. A number of us smoke cigars, about half are recovering alcoholics, and a couple of the men could embarrass a sailor with their language. Two of the Notorious Sinners show up on their Harleys, complete with leather pants and leather jackets.

I admit I run with a rough crowd—Christians whose discipleship is

blatantly real and carelessly passionate, characterized by a brazen godliness. Unafraid to admit their flaws, unintimidated by Christians who deny their own messiness, these guys sometimes look like pagans and other times look like Jesus. They are spiritual troublemakers, really, which is why they look like Jesus (who was always causing trouble himself). They are full of mischief, laughter, and boisterous behavior, which is why they look like pagans. Truly messy disciples. The Notorious Sinners are definitely a bizarre mix of the good, the bad, and the ugly, living a spirituality which defies simple definitions.

Oh, and they are some of the most spiritual men I know.

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Jesus is not repelled by us, no matter how messy we are, regardless of how incomplete we are. When we recognize that Jesus is not discouraged by our humanity, is not turned off by our messiness, and simply doggedly pursues us in the face of it all, what else can we do but give in to His outrageous, indiscriminate love?

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Spirituality looks like whatever you and I look like when we're thinking about Jesus, when we are trying to find Jesus, when we are trying to figure out what real Christianity looks like in the real world.

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Some people consider the use of words like *messy spirituality* rude and audacious. "How dare you suggest that people are messy? What are you proposing? Are you suggesting that sin is okay, that we should condone less than a 100 percent effort to serve God? You are too negative. It's not helpful to emphasize our flaws."

But the truth is, we *are* a mess. None of us is who we appear to be. We all have secrets. We all have issues. We all struggle from time to time. No one is perfect. Not one. (I have just paraphrased Romans 3:10.) The essence of messy spirituality is the refusal to pretend, to lie, or to allow others to believe we are something we are not. Unfortunately, people can handle the most difficult issues more easily than they can handle the lack of pretending.

When you and I stop pretending, we expose the pretending of everyone else. The bubble of the perfect Christian life is burst, and we all must face the reality of our brokenness.

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Freedom in Christ. What a nice concept. Sadly, most Christians are frightened of freedom. Ever since Jesus announced, "You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free," many in the church have tried to explain away His remark: "What Jesus meant is that we are free not to sin." Which is true. We are free not to sin. And we are also free to sin.

The radical truth of freedom in Christ is that I am free to choose good or bad, right or wrong, this way or that way. I can choose to run *to* Christ or run *away from* Christ. Freedom in Christ means I am free from everyone else's definition of freedom for *me*. Because I am free in Christ, when it comes to my relationship with him, he is the only one I answer to. Because I am free in Christ, I am free from other people's concern that I might not use my freedom well. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 3:17, "And where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

The psalmist said, "I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts." Freedom clearly is connected to seeking out God's precepts, which means those who seek to follow God's commands are set free to roam in the wide-open spaces of his love.

God's Word makes it clear He trusts us with freedom, even though it can be misused, even though he knows we might not be able to handle it. All He can do is leave us with His words, His precepts, and then let us figure out how a spiritual person would act in the context of our lives.

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During my adolescence, I made hundreds of decisions to become a Christian, to re-become a Christian, to rededicate my life to God, to rededicate my rededication, to go into full-time Christian service, to treat my parents better, to give God my hormones. I meant every one of those decisions, yet I successfully acted on most of them for only about two or three days. Still, those two or three days laid the groundwork for the next decision. I couldn't have made the next decision if I had not made the previous one. *I was growing one decision at a time.* No question about it, my growing looked inconsistent: two steps backward, one step forward, up and down, in and out, over and under. But I was growing all the same.

excerpts from

"Dangerous Wonder" Columns

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You Just Hang On

I'm in awe of youth workers, and I think Jesus is, too. I just wish the Church felt the same.

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The Truth Shall Make You Odd

What characterizes Christianity in the modern world is its odd-ness. Christianity is home for people who are out of step, unfashionable, unconventional and counter-cultural. As Peter says, "strangers and aliens."

I pastor the slowest growing church in America. We started 12 years ago with 90 members and have un-grown to 30. We're about as far as you can get from a "user friendly" church—not because our congregation is unfriendly, but because our services are unpredictable, unpolished and inconsistent.

We're an "odd-friendly" church, attracting unique and different followers of Christ who make every service a surprise. We refuse to edit oddness and incom-

petence from our services. We believe our oddness matters. We want our service filled with mistakes and surprises, because life is full of mistakes and surprises.

One Sunday morning, during the time for prayer requests, a member began describing the critical illness of her father. Because she was close to her father, her request for prayer was frequently interrupted by tears. Those around her reached out a hand or nodded with sadness. Some found their eyes filling with tears as well. The woman finished her request as best as she could.

Seated in the front row was Sadie—a young woman with Down's syndrome. Sadie stood and walked up the aisle until she saw the woman in the middle of her row. Stepping over the feet of other people in the aisle, Sadie reached the woman, bent down on her knees, laid her head on the woman's lap, and cried with her.

Sadie "inconvenienced" an entire row of people, stepped on their shoes, and forced them to make room for her. … but none of us will ever forget that moment. Sadie is still teaching the rest of us what the odd compassion of Christ's church looks like. …

But Christians do have an identity. Aliens! We're the odd ones, the strange ones, the misfits, the outsiders, the incompatibles. Oddness is a gift of God that sits dormant until God's spirit gives it life and shape. Oddness is the consequence of following the One who made us unique, different … and in His image!

May our youth ministries be the home of oddness, the place where differentness is encouraged, where sameness is considered a sin, so that the image of our holy and odd God will be lifted up for all to see.

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Piling on the Millstones

Youth group should be an adventure, a cauldron of fire and passion, an uncontainable terrifying presence of the Holy Spirit overflowing into the souls of students resulting in a volatile desire for Jesus regardless of the chaos caused by following him!

Unfortunately, too many adults are more concerned about young people ruining the carpet than they are about Jesus ruining their lives. They're more upset by tattoos and earrings than the stress and busyness caused by parental expectations, more worried about peer pressure than parental pressure, more upset by unpredictability than predictability, and more fearful of the loss of

future income than the loss of creativity and imagination.

More millstones, please.

May God give us a new generation of youth workers unintimidated by denominations and institutions, who refuse to be held hostage to a paycheck, and who believe it's their calling to rescue this generation from the jaws of a comfortable, compliant, lifeless religion, so they can proudly introduce this generation to the unstable, captivating, erratic, triumphant, upside-down, wondrous, inconsistent, irregular, noble, haphazard, awe-inspiring, stormy, magnificent, tempestuous, rowdy, dazzling, turbulent, outrageous, reckless, spectacularly glorious life of a disciple of Christ.

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Hurried Discipleship

I disagree with the popular practice of involving young people in an intense regimen of Bible study, prayer, worship, leadership, evangelism and accountability where young people are challenged to "take the campus for Christ," "be radical for Jesus," and "give 110%."

I know; I know. How could any Bible-believing Christian not believe in a youth ministry that encourages young people to be "on fire for Jesus"?

Well, of course I'm in favor of young people knowing Jesus. What I'm not in favor of is young people doing Jesus because what most youth-oriented discipleship programs are about is *doing*—reading the Bible, praying, worshipping, attending, leading, and evangelizing with no mention of intimacy, waiting, listening, noticing, and paying attention.

Youth-oriented discipleship programs have reduced disciples to cheerleaders and political organizers. Discipleship has been turned into a measurable, external activity instead of an immeasurable, internal lack of activity. Spending time evangelizing has replaced spending time with Jesus, and sharing our faith with others has replaced growing in our faith with Jesus. But there is another, more serious problem.

Young people are…well…young, which means they are immature, confused by their hormones, inexperienced, naïve and idealistic. None of these qualities are "bad"; in fact, they are wonderful gifts of youth that are needed in the church, but they are not neutral. Simply put, discipleship is a lifelong process, not a youth activity.

Remember when you were a little child and you dressed up in your parents'

clothes? Such antics were cute, but clearly the clothes didn't fit. Young people are being asked to dress up like disciples, but the clothes don't fit.

How could they? The Bible was written by adults, men who'd lived long lives, men who'd suffered greatly for their faith and the conclusions they reached had been squeezed out of pain and heartbreak and failure. We impose our adult views of discipleship on young people who couldn't possibly understand what it all means.

They haven't lived long enough. But in a culture where youth is worshipped and idolized by adults, where young people are called young adults, where young people are portrayed in the media as wise, untainted gurus of insight, it's no wonder we convince young people that they're the hope of the world.

Funny…I thought Jesus was the hope of the world.

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The "Trouble" with Youth Ministry

Youth ministry is dangerous. When you and I are trying to follow Jesus we're going to get into trouble. Trouble-making is what discipleship looks like. Our role is not to create nice, compliant American citizens ready to get a good job and have 2.4 kids. Our job is to introduce young people to the life-ruining Jesus who causes nothing but trouble.

Listen…if your church doesn't have a rule made just because of your youth ministry (no soccer in the sanctuary, no orange punch in fellowship hall), you aren't letting Jesus be first place in your ministry. Trouble is the youth worker's middle name.

Remember, all they can do is fire you.

A youth worker in our town was recently fired because he was reaching the "wrong kind of kid." I thought the wrong kind of kid was the right kind of kid.

The elders insisted that youth ministry was not about bringing in the "riff raff" off the streets but working with the kids that were already Christians.

I thought we were all riff raff.

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The Sins of Youth Ministry

What characterizes followers of Christ is that we tell the truth. I'm not talking about doctrinal truth—I'm talking truth truth: Where we talk

about our strengths and weaknesses; where we talk about our victories and defeats; where we talk about our successes and failures; where we talk about our answers and doubts; where we talk about our joys and depressions; where we talk about our courage and fear.

We talk about all of life. We're not afraid that teens will see life as a struggle every day—and that it will always be so. Most of all, we point them away from us and toward Jesus. We decrease while Jesus increases.

What's so disturbing about youth ministry today, however, is how little truth-telling there is.

I've been in youth ministry for 40 years, and I wish I could have some of those years to live over again. Oh, God, forgive me for causing your little ones to sin. Oh, God, help me to learn from my mistakes. Oh, God, in spite of me, cause all of Your little ones to run into Your arms.

Oh, God, help us all.

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Souls in Danger

I'm very concerned about the souls of America's youth workers. Youth ministry here is precariously close to collapsing under the weight of its own success. We seem to be caught in the spell of a media-driven, techno-event culture that's dazzling the life out of us. We have a spectacular array of seminars, products, conventions, rallies, crusades, and programs that draw large crowds, make lots of noise—and we wait expectantly for the next spectacular array of events. Sadly, an increasing number of youth workers have opted for more instead of deep. All over the country, one youth ministry after another is becoming a monument to our charisma, a tribute to our technology, a testimony to our management skills...and one more nail in the body of Jesus.

It isn't easy to stay with Jesus in ministry...but we must. Deep in our souls, he's whispering how much he loves us. If we'd just take the time to listen to those words and believe them, our ministries would be gloriously ruined by Jesus—and our souls would no longer be in danger.

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Run for Your Soul!

When you take the pagan worship of busyness and add to it the biblical mandate to reach the world, you have a lethal combination. The church has baptized busyness and activity and basically formed a pact with the devil. This pact has succeeded in silencing those who criticize the trend toward hectic, overworked, burned-out, spiritually dry ministers who—in the "name of God"—neglect their families, their souls, and their physical well-being.

If I can be so audacious as to "blaspheme" the Gospel of Growth, I respectfully suggest this modern rush to urgency is not only wrong, it's arrogance gone mad.

The moment we believe the Kingdom of God is dependent on you or me, we've either experienced a schizophrenic episode or we've misunderstood our roles as Christians.

Yes, we are to be salt and light. Yes, we are to "go into all the world." Yes, we are to "make disciples." But last time I checked, it took Jesus three years of concentrated effort to make 12 disciples—and it took them the rest of their lives to understand what discipleship means. Last time I checked, Paul suggests we are in Christ, not working for Him.

Youth workers, you haven't been called to crazy, maddening schedules. You haven't been called to reach every student for Christ. You haven't been called to fix all the kids in your youth groups. The weight of your youth groups isn't on your shoulders. Your calling is to be faithful to Christ and to your families—and to reach those you can. Growth is not the gospel. *More* and *bigger* are not fruits of the Spirit.

Statement of Faith

Important Stuff Youth Specialties believes

We believe in Jesus.

We know He's part of the Trinity and all the other important stuff we also believe, but if we're honest, we're partial to Jesus. Don't get us wrong. God is like a father—no, God IS the Father—and the buck stops with Him (if you're going to have the buck stop somewhere it might as well stop with Someone who is...well...all about love with a capital L. Of course, He's also about justice with a capital J, but we'll take our chances that, in the end, justice will feel like love). And then there is the Holy Spirit—mysterious, windy, seems to like fire a lot, whispering, and always pointing us to...you guessed it...Jesus. We not only like Jesus a lot, He likes us a lot. Enough to die for us. We know that when life gets tough (and it always does) He'll be there for us.

We believe in the Church.

We know—it's flawed, inconsistent, institutional, bureaucratic, even embarrassing sometimes. Yet it is also incredibly heroic at other times. Whether we like it or not, want to attend it or not, we're stuck with it. There are a lot of para-

church organizations out there that are a lot more glamorous at first glance, but the Church is the Body of Christ, and that's pretty glamorous too. The Church is not optional, it's not up for discussion, it's been around ever since Jesus, and it's still here. That's good enough for us.

We believe in the scandalous grace of God.

Grace is outrageously unfair, ridiculously extravagant, and unashamedly the center of the gospel, and it sure beats judgmentalism, legalism, and all the other isms. Grace always gives second chances, third chances, and never stops giving chances. Grace has Jesus written all over it. Grace makes people nervous, because they are always so worried someone is going to take advantage of it. But that's what we like about grace. You *can* take advantage of it. But here's the really interesting part—grace doesn't just let everyone in. Anyone, yes, but not everyone. And the Grace of God frequently includes the unexpected. So...who's in and who's not? Only God knows, and that's fine with us.

We believe in the Bible.

We're awed by it, inspired by it, and believe it is Truth. We're also terrified of it. We don't understand all of it, but we believe it. All of it. That's the important part, because if you only believe some of it, if you try to edit out the parts you don't like, then you don't believe it. Of course, believing it all doesn't mean we perfectly live it all. It doesn't even mean we have it all figured out. Mostly we're scared of it, scared in a good way, because whenever we read it and try to live by it, God shows up and that's pretty terrifying...and also pretty amazing, and pretty...uh...assuring.

That's kind of it. The "biggies."

We know there's other important stuff out there...actually, a lot of other stuff: theology, doctrine, homosexuality, abortion, war, the second coming, prophecy, music, discipleship, appearance, serving, worship, tattoos, dancing, drinking, traditions, smoking, language, baptism, moral issues and...well, like we said, lots of stuff.

All that stuff is important, and certainly people should try to figure out what to believe about all those things, but that's exactly the point. We believe that if the "biggies" are sorted out, then all the other stuff will eventually fall into place too. It might not fall into the same place as the brother or sister next to you, but that's what makes the kingdom of God so interesting. Right?