

TCW

TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN

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HOW TO LOVE AN
ATHEIST

PRONE TO
WANDER, JUDGE,
AND DISCRIMINATE

Why Are
Women
Leaving the
Church?





PHOTO BY BRITTANY KAUPPI



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In No One We Trust

What do we lose when we choose to be “spiritual but not religious”?



Natalie Lederhouse, Administrative Editor

Knowledge is as simple as stroking a few keys. Because we can just search the Internet for answers—whether we need some personal advice, a quick history lesson, the latest game score, or perhaps even a paranoid self-diagnosis—many of us have learned to be **skeptics**. We’ve learned to be critical of whatever Google cannot “explain” to us.

Rather than trusting **authorities**, we tend to trust our own experience or the experience of those around us. We no longer trust police, doctors (or their **vaccines**), government, or institutions. Is it any surprise we’ve grown up in a culture that doesn’t trust the church?

You’d think this environment of distrust could drive us toward an **omnipotent, omniscient** God with a **good plan** for us. Why would anyone reject the source of such truth and knowledge?

While the church is filled with fallen people, unfortunately the mistakes of its members have discredited Jesus’ bride as a whole, so many are not driven to God in droves because the church fits neatly into that category of institutions not to trust.

So it’s no surprise when we see statistics that reveal Millennials are leaving the church, choosing instead to identify as “spiritual but not religious.” Though, the more recent news is that now, more than ever before, *women* of all ages are also on the move. But is this skepticism the reason why they’re leaving? In **“Why Are Women Leaving the Church?”** Roxanne Stone delves into the reasons behind this exodus, sharing Barna Group research that will help the church better understand today’s culture.

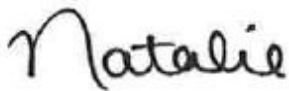
According to Pew Research’s **recent study**, the entire American Christian population is shrinking dramatically, with those religiously unaffiliated—self-identifying as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular”—growing more than six percentage points in the past

seven years. With the rise of this group comes a new mission field, and former atheist [Dr. Alicia Britt Chole](#) shares five ways you can love an atheist in your life.

The last thing we want is for our kids or loved ones to become the reason this population of leavers and “[nones](#)” is growing, but why should we be so adamant about teaching them to trust and follow God? TCW’s editor [Kelli B. Trujillo](#) shares truths about why she believes the claims of atheism ring hollow and why she’s choosing to raise her kids *with* God.

Although more and more people every day are learning to distrust others, as Christians we can trust that the Holy Spirit will continue to [teach and guide](#) us as we interact with those with differing views. Even in this culture of skepticism and doubt, we can rely on Jesus’ promise: “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20). Even as many walk away, his truth never wavers: “I will build my church, and the powers of hell will not conquer it” (Matthew 16:18).

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Natalie".

Natalie

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● Cover Story

Why Are Women Leaving the Church?

The reasons behind the exodus | **ROXANNE STONE**

For five years, we met every week for Bible study but rarely attended church.

From about 2002 to 2007, our small group formed a tightknit group who “did life” together. We hung out on weekends, vacationed, and a few of us even worked at the same Christian publisher. Once a week, we’d gather in a home to cook a meal and settle in for some good old-fashioned exegesis. We were all Christians with a church background of some sort, and we were serious about faith. But in the absence of church, we became “church” for one another. At least, that’s what we told ourselves.

Cue the various Millennial tropes:

I’m spiritual but not religious.

I encounter God in nature.

My friends are my church.

I love Jesus but not the church.

The hubris of youth and a well-educated, entrepreneurial, “you can do anything”

upbringing convinced us we could manage our own spiritual growth. And our formative years in evangelical church culture had taught us that *our personal relationship with Jesus* was the thing that mattered most. The church was, in our minds, intended to buoy that personal faith. If we weren't "being fed" at a church, we were free, if not duty-bound, to look elsewhere.

Since our small group spiritually nourished us, we thought little about what we might be missing each Sunday: sacraments, intergenerational community, authority. Besides, we could always download a sermon podcast if we wanted one.

I believed our story was an isolated one at the time. Today—from my perch as a researcher and journalist in the religious space—I now realize we were not alone in our angsty redefinitions of the well-lived Christian life. Countless Gen-Xers, Millennials, and post-9/11 20somethings had grown skeptical of institutions and hungry for "authentic" community.

According to Barna Group, nearly 6 in 10 20somethings who grew up in the church have dropped out at some point. Church attendance decreases with every generation and, among Millennials, continues to fall. In 2004 (shortly after our small group started), 44 percent of Millennials had not been to church in the past six months. Today, that has risen to 55 percent.¹

But that wasn't the only aspect of my small group that corresponded to a broader trend: we were comprised of more than half *women*.

Historically, men have been less likely to regularly attend church than women. That gender gap peaked in 2003, when 60 percent of unchurched people were men, before it began steadily closing. Today, only 54 percent of the unchurched are men. In other words, the gender gap has narrowed from 20 points to just 8 points.

Why are women leaving church? It is the case that they are *leaving*—the majority (85 percent) of these unchurched women are essentially *de-churched*. It's not that these women never went to church in the first place, but rather, that at one point they decided church was no longer for them.

WHAT IS MY PLACE IN CHURCH?

While [Erin Lane](#) never fully dropped out of church, her attendance for many years as a 20something was spotty. She never could quite come to the point of committing to one church—even the one where her husband was a pastor. Author of the recently released, [Lessons in Belonging from a Church-Going Commitment Phobe](#), Lane points out that women's decrease in church attendance is in line with a drop (or delay) in other traditional social bindings. "Women are delaying marriage and children, two things that have historically strengthened young people of both genders' relationship to the church," she says. "So our reluctance to be 'tied down' to people naturally affects our reluctance to be tied down to a place."

Aside from delaying marriage and children, young adults are eschewing other forms of "settling down" as well, such as long-term careers. They are more prone to regularly switching jobs (and, with that, often locales); 9 in 10 Millennials expect to stay in a single job less than

three years.² In other words, there are very few institutions—either social or economical—binding Millennials. In a recent Barna Group [study on identity](#), Millennials were significantly less likely than other generations to claim any of the surveyed factors (family, faith, country, city, state, ethnicity, career) as central to their identity.

This generational sense of disenfranchisement has not helped draw young adults in general to a church—let alone women, among whom such societal untetheredness is unprecedented. “As women have begun to catch up with men in our privilege to choose—choosing when and how to have children, choosing when and where to move, choosing what and how we will make a living—it makes sense that we’d also experience the same decreasing sense of interdependency that has anthropologically been the disposition of men,” says Lane.

Additionally, Lane points out, women have been gaining ground in every arena of society: economically, in their careers, at school. They have a new sense of vocational agency—something the church hasn’t always encouraged in women. “With more education, women have had more opportunities afforded to them to contribute to the public good,” she says. “What was different (or better) about using my gifts in a church than, say, in my work as a retreat facilitator for clergy or in the feminist writer community of which I was a part? As a young woman, I often felt a greater sense of personal voice and agency in my work outside the church than I did within its walls. Often I wouldn’t think twice about scheduling a work trip or speaking gig at least one or two weekends a month because those creative outlets felt more life giving to me and the people I served than attending church.”

[Jennifer Bailey](#), a recently ordained minister and the founder and executive director of the Faith Matters Network, observes that even seminaries are keying into this desire among young adults to “do ministry” outside of the traditional four walls of the church. She says that only about a third of the students at her seminary (Vanderbilt University Divinity School) were planning on going into traditional ministry positions at a local church. The other third were studying to go into the nonprofit sector and a final third into academics. “Seminaries are finding ministry to manifest in different ways that don’t involve, at all times, people preaching from a pulpit on Sunday morning,” says Bailey. “So for those of us who stay in these institutional structures, there’s also an openness and desire to push the boundaries of what 21st century ministry looks like. Because the institutions as they have existed for all these years clearly aren’t working.”

HOW DOES CHURCH FIT INTO MY LIFE?

These massive changes—the delaying of family, an increase in institutional skepticism, and the separation of individuals from traditional social structures—are sufficient to affect church attendance. Unfortunately, they also correspond with the great cultural lament of our time: we are [really, really busy](#).

According to Barna Group research done for the book [Wonder Women](#) by Kate Harris, 72 percent of women feel stressed out, 58 percent are tired, and 48 percent say they are overcommitted. The percentages are even higher among moms with kids at home. Nearly 9

in 10 women (88 percent) say they want to improve in at least one area of life—and the area they cite the most (over work, family, and friends)? *Church.*

“Mobility—in the form of work trips, weekend get-a-ways, college reunions, marathon running, you name it—seems to be a big hindrance to young people finding a deep sense of belonging in the church,” says Lane. “For women in particular, there are just so many other compelling things to give our time to that don’t come with veiled moral assumptions about what we can and can’t do because of our gender.”

Renee Coletrane is a senior project manager at an advertising agency in New York City. Originally from the Philadelphia area, she’s lived in New York now for 15 years but only just this year started attending a church in the city. “When I came to New York, in the beginning I’d go home a lot,” she says. “So whenever I went home, I’d visit my parent’s church. But, to be honest, I just never looked for a church here.”

Church was a huge part of Coletrane’s childhood. “I don’t want to be a total stereotype, but the church is the real hardcore center of black families,” she says. “It was always the time on Sundays that our family from all over—our nieces and cousins and aunts and uncles—would come together. And it was all centered around church. So when I say I grew up in church, I really mean that. My parents literally have a pew there. It’s that way to this day.”

But regular church attendance just never seemed to fit into the pace of Coletrane’s life in the city. It’s not that she intentionally left church—it just felt more like a thing she did with her family, when she was home. “It’s weird,” Coletrane says, “I just never really looked for a church or set out to find one.” Instead, she downloaded sermons from Andy Stanley and T. D. Jakes or watched a service online at Bethel. Without a family draw to church—and without a real urgency to find community in New York City—she felt like the aspect of church she might have wanted (the sermons) were easily accessible online. Plus, she could listen to them at a time when it fit in her schedule—at the gym or at night before bed. (Even with the church Coletrane goes to now, she started out by listening to the pastor’s sermons online for more than a year before she began attending regularly.)

It wasn’t until breaking her ankle and being bedridden for months that Coletrane began to sense maybe she was missing something: “When I broke my ankle, I realized I have a lot of fair-weather friends here,” she says. “That hurt my feelings. So when I started going to church, it was amazing to me, to really sit and dwell with people. I’m so used to sitting at dinner parties and everyone is faking it. But people at church were real—sharing their real stuff. And I felt like their stories were genuine and not fake. It’s a safe part of the city, that little church.”

Bailey echoes this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of fostering community in faith institutions. “People are still seeking meaning,” she says. “Christianity for many people is an act of meaning making. What those groups that are growing have managed to do well is to create systems of being together, of belonging and meaning that people want to be a part of.”

WHAT IF I NO LONGER BELIEVE?

Even during times of absence from or frustration with the church, both Coletrane and Lane remained Christians. They represent the majority of unchurched women; 62 percent of all unchurched women self-identify as Christian, even though they haven't attended a church service in at least six months. However—particularly among younger Christians—the number of those who have not only left the church but have also *left the faith* is growing. Just 46 percent of unchurched Millennial women self-identify as Christian. The number of women who identify as atheist or agnostic has risen from 8 percent in 2000 to 11 percent today.

Jessica Misener, a Millennial who lives in San Francisco and works as the deputy editorial director at Buzz Feed, wrote an article in 2014 about her own exodus from the evangelical church and the faith to which she had subscribed. The article, "[Why I Miss Being a Born-Again Christian](#)," details her time at Yale Divinity School and the ways in which her studies there challenged her beliefs—particularly about the Bible. It was there she began to question the evangelical insistence on scriptural inerrancy, and those questions began to chip away at her confidence. It was the start of a move away from Christianity, toward what she describes as "not so much agnosticism, but ambivalence."

Misener continued to attend church after grad school. She moved to New York City and went to Jay Bakker's Revolution church in Brooklyn. "That was probably my favorite post-evangelical church community," she says. "It was a collection of people like me who'd fallen away from their conservative backgrounds and were trying to figure out how to still maintain some kind of Christian spirituality. No one judged me for saying I no longer had any clue if I even believed in God anymore." Eventually, though, Misener says she started to feel "dishonest" attending any church regularly.

Aside from questions about the Bible, Misener describes a growing uneasiness with evangelicals' "black and white thinking" that seemed to suggest all of life's problems stemmed from people turning their back on God. "But," she says, "when you have gay friends and colleagues who are in loving relationships with their partners, and friends of other faiths or of no faith living happy, contemplative lives, it gets harder to subscribe to a dichotomy of us versus them, of Christians versus non-Christians."

Misener's questions about her faith and her struggles with the church mirror many Millennials'. Nearly 3 in 10 Millennials with a Christian background (29 percent), say they feel forced to choose between their faith and their friends. The same number say they agree that Christians are afraid of the beliefs of other faiths. And almost 4 in 10 (38 percent) say it's been their experience that churches are not accepting of gays and lesbians.

As an editor, I had worked with Misener in the past and was intrigued by her journey—particularly her admission that she missed much about her evangelical experience. I recently caught up with her over email, curious about where she stood now, a few years after the article. "Unfortunately, the apex of my realization that I didn't want to go back to the church were the hateful emails I got after I published my essay on BuzzFeed," she tells me. "Most of the letters I got from Christians were kind, but there were a few really nasty letters. It definitely didn't make me want to go skipping back to the church, clicking my heels."

But, she admits, she remains conflicted about letting that part of her life go. "I do still

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But, she admits, she remains conflicted about letting that part of her life go. "I do still

deeply miss the church community in a lot of ways,” she says. “A lot of ex-Christians have a chip on their shoulder about the church (some for very legitimate reasons!). I’ll never be one of them. I have seen religion do a lot of bad, but I’ve also seen it do a lot of good. I think the real value in faith of any kind is that it provides a constant reminder that there is something bigger than yourself—that the world doesn’t exist to just orbit your own ego. I’ll always value any religious or non-religious tradition that keeps my innate selfishness as a human being in check.”

Today, Misener tells me she considers herself “non-religious,” which she says mostly just means she doesn’t attend any sort of service or practice a personal prayer life. “I’m open to the idea that that could change in the future, though,” she says.

THE WAY BACK

From that little small group I was a part of so many years ago, three of the seven of us have returned to church: one couple and me. When I talk to people about declining church attendance among young adults, I often hear something along the lines of, “Oh, once they get married and have kids, they’ll be back.” There’s probably some truth to that—it’s a cycle that’s been seen in generations before this one. However, it’s also possible they won’t; it wasn’t the case for even most of my group. The delay in marriage and children alone means those years between high school youth group and eventual “settling in” to an adult church are extended; it’s no longer three or four years, but a decade or longer. Those are formative years to be away from a church.

And, while we may have wanted to tell ourselves we could grow spiritually and pursue Jesus just fine on our own—no church necessary—the evidence shows otherwise. The truth is, people who are disconnected from church (even those who self-identify as Christian) are proven to be less likely to engage in other faith activities, including Bible reading, prayer, volunteering, and charitable giving. While correlation never equals causation, these are important indicators to pay attention to. Whether we want to admit it or not, church attendance roots believers in regular faith rhythms and practices.

If I could give my decade-younger self some advice, I’d tell her to keep investing in that hungry small group of spiritual seekers. But I’d remind her to not give up on the church in the meantime—broken, flawed, and deeply human though she is. I would gently insist that there is no loving Jesus but not his bride. There is no such thing as a healthy spirituality divorced from religion. To seek God in this world today, I’d say to her, is to necessarily find the church—it is his promised hands and feet; it is the **body of Christ** alive, present, and at work.

Roxanne Stone is a vice president at Barna Group. She has worked in publishing for more than a decade, serving as an editor at Group Publishing, Christianity Today, RELEVANT, and Q Ideas.

¹ Barna Group defines Millennials as those born between 1984 and 2002.

² Future Workplace, “Multiple Generations @ Work.”



How to Love an Atheist

A former atheist shares 5 compelling principles | **DR. ALICIA BRITT CHOLE**

*Truth was dead.
God had never lived.
Life was filled of pain.
And death was the end of life.¹*

These beliefs formed my worldview as a young atheist: I sincerely believed that there was no God. When people hear my story, they often tell theirs with something close to agony in their eyes: a son, a daughter, a brother, a mother, a spouse, a colleague—someone they love denies God’s existence. “Your journey from atheism to faith,” they whisper, “gives me *hope* that one day they will know God.”

Hope and atheism? Yes, indeed! When you love an atheist, you have great reason to hope. Their words may wound you. Their actions may confuse you. But the God in whom you hope is mighty to save and relentless in his loving pursuit of their souls. To complement your prayers for their salvation, I offer you five “Be’s” for those who love atheists.

1. BE RESPECTFUL: PEOPLE RARELY CHOOSE ATHEISM LIGHTLY

I like atheists. Without exception I have enjoyed the company of every *authentic* atheist I have met. (*Authentic*, however, is a key adjective because occasionally pretenders don the cloak of atheism to satisfy their addiction to arguing, and I have a painfully low tolerance for

posers of any variety.) In general, atheists are thoughtful, witty, and deeply committed to their perceptions of reality.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *respect* means “consideration” and “regard,” not agreement. Respect invites us to remember that people have a reason for what they believe. Some inherit atheism from their families or cultures. Some turn to atheism to make sense of the planet’s insanely inequitable distribution of health, wealth, and safety. Some choose atheism for scientific or (like I did) philosophical reasons. And some default to the belief in the wake of painful disillusionment with God and his people.

Reasons matter. In fact, *what* your loved one believes is simply the outcome of *why* they believe. Like a good doctor, instead of being distracted and distraught by the fruits of their beliefs, focus on discerning the roots of their beliefs. Respectful listening can reveal root causes, and root causes can give us specific direction for intercession. So as Peter advised, “If someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way” (1 Peter 3:15–16).

2. BE HUMBLE: AN HONEST “I DON’T KNOW” INSPIRES TRUST

How lovely it would be if all we had to do to win a debate with an atheist was utter truth and, regardless of our eloquence, our loved one would offer a sigh of relief, say, “Ah, there it is,” and run into the arms of Jesus! Human debates, however, are won more by skill than by truth. If you find yourself mismatched in skill with an atheist, all is not lost: humility can still win their trust.

As a young atheist, my response to Christian friends’ attempts to “give an answer” ranged from mild amusement to bewildered annoyance. Our discussions would end in debate, and our debates would end in their tears. Then they would utter these weighty words: “We don’t know, Alicia. We don’t have an answer. But we do know that Jesus lives and that he loves you.”

“I don’t know” is a surprisingly smart answer when it is true. And believing when we do not have all the answers is a decent working definition of *faith* (*Hebrew 11:1*). My friends’ faith, far more than their “answers,” made it past my mind and stirred my spirit.

3. BE ENCOURAGED: UNBELIEF DOES NOT ALTER GOD

Unlike fictional Santas and fairies that lose their power when humanity’s believe-o-meters run low, God’s existence is neither strengthened by belief nor weakened by unbelief. God is prior. In other words, his existence precedes ours.

Our greatest shout cannot thicken his presence, and our greatest doubt cannot thin his presence. Your loved one’s unbelief does not offend God: he still is and he still loves.

A secular radio station host once asked me if a certain ridiculously heretical best-seller made me nervous. “God’s not nervous about this book,” I replied. “So I’m having a hard time figuring out why I should be nervous.” Your loved one’s unbelief does not make God nervous. He is, after all, rather secure. Take heart, for God specializes in the pursuit of stubborn souls:

“I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me;
I was found by those who did not seek me.
To a nation that did not call on my name,
I said, ‘Here am I, here am I.’” (Isaiah 65:1, NIV)

4. BE TEACHABLE: LEARN FROM THEM

Your loved one’s atheism cannot void the fact that they are gloriously covered with God’s fingerprints. Their very existence bears his signature. They are “formed by [his] hands” (*Isaiah 64:8*). I believe that we can learn from everyone (and everything) God created. What is their strength? What is their hobby? What is their skill? Ask earnest questions about it—then listen and learn.

Why? Because being teachable is a practical application of being respectful and humble. Because honoring others’ strengths honors their Creator. Because listening is a form of love, and love penetrates skepticism at depths debate can only dream of. Because learning from others opens the door for them to learn from you. Being genuinely teachable is surprisingly disarming.

5. BE PRESENT: CHRIST IS WITHIN YOU

Whether by phone or in person, whether by email or over dinner, when your loved one is near you, they are near Jesus. By a mystery we can only faintly comprehend, Jesus takes up residence in his followers. As Paul said, “Christ lives in you” (*Colossians 1:27*). Astounding!

Though as a young atheist my Christian friends’ buoyant beliefs were irritating, their presence was soothing. I liked being near them. Only later did I realize that the peace I felt was the Prince of Peace within them. At the end of the day, all their well-intended explanations paled in comparison with the gift they gave to me: the present of presence. They were close enough, long enough, that because God *is*, his reality echoed through their humanity and something deep within me began to awaken.²

THE REST OF THE STORY

People often ask if my God-encounter resolved all my philosophical angst. In a word: no. I still have questions, but now I ask them looking into God’s eyes. Occasionally, I stumble upon a partial answer. But always, I find myself walking more closely with the God who mentors my mind. The goal of faith was never answers. The goal of faith is intimacy with Jesus—our near-yet-infinite, timeless-yet-ever-new treasure.

And now for the rest of the story:

“God *is*,” I realized. My worldview was irreparably altered.

I had never considered myself a prisoner, but instantly I knew that I was free. I had never considered myself dead, but now I knew that I was alive. The

encounter was depositing within me a gift: faith—a living, growing substance not made by human hands. Escorted by faith, I entered an indescribably beautiful, stunningly satisfying, adventure-filled mystery:

*Truth is not dead.
God has always lived.
Life is full of pain.
Death is but a door.
And the God who is, aches to love us.*³

Dr. Alicia Britt Chole is a speaker, author, and leadership mentor. She is the founding director of a mentoring nonprofit, Leadership Investment Intensives, Inc. Her next book, *40 Days of Decrease*, will be published by Thomas Nelson for Lent 2016. Follow her on Twitter at [@aliciachole](https://twitter.com/aliciachole) or at her website AliciaChole.com.

¹ Alicia Britt Chole, *Finding an Unseen God: Reflections of a Former Atheist* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2009), 11–13.

² Chole, *Finding an Unseen God*, 145.

³ Chole, *Finding an Unseen God*, 164.



Finding Joy in the 9 to 5

It's time to bring your unique self to every aspect of your life—including work. | **NICOLE UNICE**

Women work, and they work hard. In 2013, the Department of Labor reported **57 percent** of women work full or part time. That same report places the number of mothers (with children under 18 years old) working outside the home—part time or full time—at **nearly 70 percent**. Other studies show women spend consistently more time on housework, cooking, and childcare than men.

Every day, we spend more time working than anything else. When the work is good, we find life and purpose in our jobs. Being able to create, cultivate, and steward our skills and resources puts us in touch with our Creator, who has given us a desire to contribute to the world in meaningful ways. But when work is hard, it can be difficult to connect our daily routine to our Creator. If anything, we feel less creative, less free, less like *ourselves*. When it comes to our work, most of us experience seasons of “good” and seasons of “hard.” So whichever season you are in, how can we each bring our unique, creative selves to all of it—whether it’s flipping an egg in the pan or programming formulas into a spreadsheet? Let’s explore together how you can find joy in the work God’s given you, starting right now.

1. COMMIT

When we follow Jesus, we are committing to an everyday experience. The original word for “disciple” in Scripture is also translated as “learner” or “student.” When we place our feet on the ground in the morning, we are invited to begin another day as *students* of Jesus. It

doesn't matter what kind of work that day involves—it's still an open invitation to follow him.

It's easy to assume God treats our work like the world treats our work—categorizing its importance by salary or influence or cultural norms of success. But Jesus walked into the everyday reality of the world and turned that understanding of importance completely upside down. Jesus invited people from every social strata and every economic background to join him. Look at who Jesus attracts: his disciples are custodians and CEOs, stay-at-home moms and surgeons, preschool teachers and politicians. He makes no distinction in our importance by what we do—he cares about *who we are*.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan ([Luke 10:25-37](#)), Jesus raises the stakes. The cast of characters in the parable includes an expert in the law (an attorney), a priest, a temple worker, and a “despised Samaritan” (verse 33). In this story, Jesus taught the law expert that his desire to understand how to be a good neighbor doesn't have anything to do with understanding the rules or doing the right kind of job. In fact, it's the one character in the story the law expert would expect nothing from—the “despised Samaritan”—who ends up actually doing the work of the law. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus makes a point to separate the work of following him from the work that pays the bills. This is good news for all of us who wonder if our work matters. If you are tempted to make your importance in God's kingdom related to your “importance” on earth, know that Jesus lived a life that defied that expectation, and he invites us to do the same.

As you begin your work today, you can start with a commitment to Jesus. A simple prayer might help: *Jesus, I want to follow you today—to be your student. Open my heart to receive your instruction as I work, to notice what you are doing around me, and to respond to it.*

2. PARTNER

When we pray daily to follow Jesus, we are more in tune with the partnership of the Holy Spirit. A friend who recently went to work for a large corporation after several years in ministry told me that she struggled to see how she was doing “important work” in her office. It wasn't until a coworker thanked her for how she encouraged her daily that her eyes were opened to see her call to minister in the workplace. “Work with enthusiasm, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people,” Ephesians 6:7 says. Bringing our enthusiastic, joyful selves to any kind of work, no matter how menial, is the challenge God gives us.

The parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us our job is to be attentive to the needs around us. This might come in the form of an encouraging word to our children as we pick them up from school, or a well-designed presentation that shows our dedication and enthusiasm to our work. God calls us to a diligent life where he is always partnering with us



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to advance his kingdom. This brings a sense of adventure to our ordinary days—where we are always attentive to the quiet whisperings of our comforter and coach, the Holy Spirit.

3. REFINE

Yesterday I began my work with the first two steps—praying to follow Jesus and being attentive to partnering with the Holy Spirit—for about 20 minutes. But by the time I emptied the dishwasher, packed lunches, drove morning carpool, sent an overdue email, and—oh, yeah—showered, I left late for my first meeting. By 9:30 A.M., I wanted the day to be over. I was irritated and behind in my work, much more concerned with what I was (or wasn't) getting done than I was with cultivating inner joy! But it is in these unattractive moments that we learn our next lesson of the day: God is deeply concerned with our heart and mildly interested in our work.

The good news that Jesus Christ brings is that our heavenly Father cares about who we are much more than what we do. In a revolutionary move, God changes up our ideas of success because he cares most about what we need most. He is someone who loves us fiercely, completely, and deeply—loving us into the person he knows we can be. Every irritation, every failure, every conflict, every unsolved problem is an opportunity to draw near to him.

If I could go back to 9:30 yesterday, I would stop and take a deep breath. I would thank God for the small gifts and find something to praise him for. Then I would continue with my day. Because within our work we find *refinement* for our character, and even though it's hard, it's worth celebrating.

4. CELEBRATE

Author and theologian Dallas Willard was known for describing Jesus with one word: relaxed. One of the things hard workers often miss is the joy of relaxing—but I don't mean the kind of relaxing that comes with a nap or a good book. This kind of relaxing is an inner setting that is at rest and at peace regardless of the work required. Jesus, our example of how to really live, was relaxed. Even in the pressure of the crowds, the conflict of the Pharisees, and the confusion of his disciples, Jesus was relaxed. Yes, he worked hard, but he did it without striving or anxiety.

You may think trying to follow Jesus into relaxation is impossible. I think it is—outside of the work of his grace. But if it sounds good to you, if you wish you could learn better how to balance work and rest, then you can do something different today: *celebrate*. Choose to see the creative, expansive, beautiful ways God is filling your workday, from a blue sky to a great joke to a helpful coworker.


Helped a meeting make progress? *Celebrate*. Hugged your kids when they got off the bus? *Celebrate*. Made a healthy weeknight dinner? *Yep. Hip, hip, hooray!*

We are relaxed when we celebrate the little things. Our perspective changes, our spirits lift, and we have more energy for the harder tasks. We don't wait until we feel like celebrating—we just do it. And in small ways, in “pebbles and shoots” as author Anne Lamott writes, we are changed.

You have an opportunity tomorrow to start with a fresh perspective on your workday. You can commit to follow Jesus, pray for his partnership, and be attentive to his refinement. You can celebrate the little things as a spiritual practice of *relaxing* into him, even in the most stressful of circumstances. What a gift we have in our call to live with purpose and freedom in the midst of a world that's so often anxious and joyless. We have Jesus, we have hope, and we can bring that with us no matter where our work takes us!



Nicole Unice is a TCW regular contributor. Nicole is on the ministry staff of Hope Church and author of *Brave Enough* (Tyndale House Publishers, August 2015) and *She's Got Issues*. She writes for a variety of magazines and speaks nationwide at retreats and leadership events. Nicole and her husband, Dave, have three children. You can find her blogging about honest living at NicoleUnice.com.

A portrait of Jo Saxton, a Black woman with her hair styled in braids, smiling warmly. She is wearing a teal top and a necklace with yellow and white beads. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a stone wall and greenery.

● Interview

When it's Hard to Call God “Father”

For Jo Saxton, growing to know God as Father meant a long journey of forgiveness. | **INTERVIEW BY KELLI B. TRUJILLO**

*TCW [advisor](#) Jo Saxton co-pastors [Mission Point Church](#) in the Twin Cities with her husband and serves as Chair of the Board for [3D Movements](#), a global discipleship ministry. A mom of two, Jo is a sought-after speaker and the author of several books including *More Than Enchanting*. I connected with Jo to hear more about her journey of healing, forgiveness, and faith.*

When you spoke at the [IF:Gathering](#) this year, you shared how having an absent father deeply impacted your faith and sense of self. What was it like as you grew up?

My parents are Nigerian and I was born in London, England. They split up before I was born—my dad moved back to Nigeria, my mom stayed in England. It was a broken situation, and I spent the first six years of my life in foster care.

I became a Christian when I was nine, but the “God the Father” part of my faith seemed irrelevant because, to me, a “father” was someone who walked away.

I never even met my dad until I was 12 years old. I met him again when I was 15, and at that point I was deeply aware of the pain of it all. As a teenager, I poignantly felt what I’d lost, what I didn’t get to have. So I thought of Jesus as my Savior and my friend, but the idea of God as Father? It was very painful.

You've shared that, as an older teenager, you had an experience at a church in which a speaker specifically said that someone in the congregation needed to come to know God as Father—needed to understand God's love in that way. You knew that message was for you. How did that moment change you?

The Lord really met me and unlocked years of grief. When that person said that God was my Father, it was almost like I was meeting God for the first time.

I knew God and was attuned to his voice, but it was that particular revelation of *God as Father* that I'd never gotten a grip on. But suddenly my life and the idea of God the Father collided. Initially the collision was full of grief and anger and sorrow. I broke down in tears. But I also wondered, "Now what?" I didn't know how to relate to God in that way.

I shared this struggle with my pastor and his wife, and they told me that God was responsible for revealing himself as Father to me—that it wasn't up to me, that God would get through to me. About a week later, I "started over" in my prayers. I said, *Hey God, my name is Jo. I don't know how to do this. I don't know what a father is meant to do or what a father is meant to be. I don't know how to get to know you in this way.*

Another time, when I was 20, I literally talked to God all night long—I started at the beginning and told him every single thing I felt. Every memory, every encounter. When I finished praying that next morning, I knew something had shifted in our relationship.

How did your relationship with God as "Father" grow and change?

Much of God's provision for me was through the church as God brought a number of father figures into my life. Initially, I found it very hard to get to know these men because I just didn't have a framework for it. But God used them to somehow give me a glimpse of what God's constancy was like, what God's approval was like, what God's pride in me was like.

I was on a journey of healing with God, but also a journey of forgiveness with my dad. My dad was such a big figure in my life, such an absent figure, such a broken figure. The pain of that relationship still kept creeping into every part of my life.

So what happened with your dad?

I was 25 years old the last time I physically saw my dad. I saw him during a mission trip to Nigeria. I met him and chatted with him for a while. He said he'd be around the next day—but he didn't show. I realized I had to come to terms with who he was, which was very hard.

I was at a conference one time and the speaker said you know you've forgiven someone when you can tear up the "IOUs" and they owe you nothing. How could I do that? I felt my dad owed me birthday cards, birthday presents . . . *life* with him. But God said to me, *You have carried this for so long. Give me the expectations of what he owes you and let me fill in the gaps.* I knew I couldn't be fully free unless I could forgive my dad—but it happened through degrees of forgiveness.

Eventually I wrote my dad a letter. I essentially told him, "You're off the hook. You don't have to write me any more if you don't want to. You don't have to do anything anymore. I feel like the Lord's telling me to let you go. So if you want to stay in touch, that's fine—but if you don't, that's fine." He wrote back to me and said, "If that's what your God is like, then I want to know more about your God."

In 2008 he had been ill, so my siblings and I sent him some money for the bills. He asked to talk to me, but I was going to put off the phone call for a few weeks. But I suddenly had this thought, *No, call him now*. So I called him and he shouted, "Jo, is that you?" I said, "Yes," and he started sobbing and sobbing and sobbing.

I said, "Look, you need to know we're at peace. All is forgiven, all is forgotten." He thanked me but kept sobbing. I asked him, "You're not at peace, are you?" and he said no.

I told him, "Jesus is the only one who is going to give you peace. The most important thing in your life right now is that you make your peace with God." We prayed together and I was able to lead him to the Lord.

He died about two weeks later.

So many women struggle with a need to forgive something that's been done to them—so many need healing. For you, did healing happen first, enabling you to forgive your dad? Or did you need to forgive your dad first in order to experience healing?

I first chose to forgive my dad when I was 16, but I was 34 when he died—and only then did the forgiveness feel complete. So it was a forgiveness 18 years in the making.

I think, for me, the *healing* began first. We love because Christ **first loved us**. I actually don't think God asked anything of me in terms of my dad. It wasn't like, "You need to forgive because it's the right thing to do." Instead, God showed me, *For the sake of your own freedom, forgiveness is an integral part of your healing*.

It's hard to forgive when you know the other person isn't going to change. For me, there was a grief and a sorrow in the midst of the forgiveness. I felt, *I'm giving you so much—I'm laying my all down here, and it means nothing to you. It's irrelevant to you because you don't think you did anything wrong*.

So every degree of forgiveness was a choice—not a feeling. Yet every choice to forgive wrought a degree of healing with it. In his mercy, God helped me understand that forgiveness didn't mean I was saying what happened was okay. On the contrary! In fact, it was so *not okay* that Jesus went to the cross on our behalf.

When God is inviting me to forgive, what is actually on the table? Ultimately, forgiveness is entering into what Christ has won for me—for us—on the cross.

What does God's fatherly role in your life mean to you today?

Today, God being my Father means he is close by. He is always there, he is very present. In

him, I feel secure—and I've been able to weather some hard things lately because I know I am safe. I know where I belong. When he leads me to take risks or do something that feels overwhelming, I feel like I'm standing right on his hand. And when I mess up, I know he's there waiting. He has helped me settle into my own skin. I know who I am because I know *whose* I am.



Kelli B. Trujillo is editor of *Today's Christian Woman*. Follow her on Twitter at [@kbtrujillo](https://twitter.com/kbtrujillo) and [@TWomancom](https://twitter.com/TWomancom).



Prone to Wander, Judge, and Discriminate

Lord, teach us to see like you.



Margot Starbuck, M.Div., is an award-winning writer and speaker. Connect with Margot on **Facebook**, **Twitter**, or at **MargotStarbuck.com**.

My 21-year-old friend Sahil recently attended a football game at a local high school. He'd slipped onto the field to say hello to one of the managers on the home team's bench. One of the coaches who'd noticed Sahil and overheard a bit of his conversation with the manager was the kind of coach who liked to impart moral lessons to his players.

As Sahil walked away, the coach turned to his players and said, "Y'all don't know how lucky you are." The implication of this life lesson was, *You are lucky to not be Sahil*.

What was it that this coach could have seen in Sahil, in that brief moment, to make him so sure that to be "fortunate," to be "blessed," was something other than being Sahil?

At the time, Sahil was wearing blue jeans and a hoodie from the YMCA where he worked. He has dark hair, a mustache, and an overwhelmingly kind face that is most often smiling. He's Indian. Born with cerebral palsy, Sahil speaks with slurred speech that can be tricky to understand at times. His sentences are short. As he walked away from the bench at the football game, he had a limp in his step.

Something this coach perceived in an instant was that it was not "lucky" to be Sahil.

MODERN-DAY SIDDUR

The coach's "lesson" brought to my mind the *siddur*, a centuries-old Jewish prayer liturgy. One of the morning prayers, to be recited by Jewish men as they begin the day, reads,

Blessed are you O God, King of the Universe,
Who has not made me a goy [Gentile], a slave, or a woman.

It was pretty easy to imagine the religious coach breathing a morning prayer like this one.

The heart of these three “blessings” is believed to have originated outside of Jewish circles. Some modern scholars point to an ancient [Greek tradition](#)—attributed by various sources to Thales, Socrates, or Plato—thanking God for three things: “that I was born a human and not a beast; a man and not a woman; a Greek and not a Barbarian.”

As it was in Jesus’ [story](#) of a righteous Pharisee and a disreputable sinner, these prayers reveal far less about the God who hears them than they do about the person praying them. They expose a host of ways we distance ourselves from those who look, speak, work, or worship differently than we do. Cloaking our bias in thin religious garb, we reveal what we believe to be *most* human and what we believe to be *least* human. Wittingly or unwittingly, when we identify others as “disabled,” “poor,” or “non-English-speaking,” we do violence by reducing them to an absurd, single sliver of their God-given identity.

One of the ways I recognize my own biases is by reflecting on how I would pray if I were really being honest: “God, thank you that I was not born _____.”

Materially poor? Mentally ill? Non-American? To uneducated parents? Physically disabled? Intellectually disabled? Into another ethnic group? Obese?

As we bravely identify the possibility that feels the most distressing, we face the truth about the way we’ve dehumanized others. We can then lament. We can confess our dehumanization of others. And, Lord willing, we can then open our eyes to see differently.

RADICAL SIGHT

I’m sure the football coach himself had been labeled, stereotyped, and flattened by others who failed to see who he really was. So not only had he reduced the essence of who Sahil was, but he’d been systematically reduced by others as well.

But probably not by Sahil. And that’s exactly why the irony of the coach’s remark has lingered with me. Sahil, as much as anyone I know, sees others—to the degree that anyone is able to—the way they really are.

Yesterday Sahil and I were searching for one of his former teachers on Facebook. After I’d typed in the teacher’s name into Facebook’s search function and faces began to populate the screen, I asked Sahil, “Is Mr. Wallace black or white? Or maybe Latino? Something else?” Sahil stared at me blankly and then admitted he didn’t know.

Sahil’s “not knowing” wasn’t a function of ignorance. Rather, as I’ve watched Sahil interact with a broad spectrum of people, I’ve come to believe that Sahil sees the way Jesus sees. I don’t mean that as a trite, flippant spiritual aphorism. I’m also not referencing the kind of faux “[color blindness](#)” or “culture blindness” that’s just as dehumanizing. I mean that—as I see it lived by Jesus—Sahil’s vision isn’t blurred by the anxious need to exclude or categorize those who are different from him. In recognizing others, he actually sees what is “fortunate” about each one, not which “box” they fit in.

It's a radically Christian way of viewing the world. As a matter of fact, this was what was so radical and unsettling to so many about Jesus. Religious folks saw a **blind man** on the side of the road as unfortunate, disabled, unclean, and sinful. When Jesus' own disciples looked at a **woman** standing near a well, they saw the wrong gender, wrong race, wrong religion, and wrong morals. And yet again and again, Jesus' behavior indicates that when he saw an "**other**," he recognized, as Sahil does, a person who'd been created in God's image.

In response to Jesus' life, the proudly Jewish apostle Paul made the outlandish claim that for those who've chosen to pattern their lives after Jesus, "there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female" (Galatians 3:28). Though its impact is largely lost to the modern ear, it was—and is—wildly revolutionary! Paul was teaching the young church in Galatia (some who'd daily prayed the *siddur*) that they no longer needed to inflate or bolster their own sense of identity by reducing others.

It's what the "grateful" Christian coach had gotten upside down and backwards. Until we see well, we cannot *love* well. And for those of us who claim to be Christian and do not yet see the way Sahil sees, the faithful response of our hearts is to lament. To confess. And to learn from Sahil.

We'd be lucky to.



● Views

Why I Raise My Kids with God

God is real, and I want my kids to know it. | **KELLI B. TRUJILLO**

The last thing I want is for my kids to someday join the throng who are walking away from the church. That's why I don't want my kids to grow up with a nominal religious practice that's simply handed down by Mom and Dad and easily shed as they reach adulthood. Instead, I want them to become adults who own their faith—who end up with a faith that's *theirs* rather than mine. This means I'm doing my best to raise them to think for themselves when it comes to matters of faith—to grapple with tough questions, test out ideas, and even to learn about belief systems like atheism or other religions.

But unlike what some in our culture propose, this does *not* mean spreading out a buffet of belief-system options and simply inviting my kids to sample various ideas and settle on what tastes best. Yes, I want them to think for themselves—but I want that thinking to be grounded in truth.

REAL ANSWERS TO TOUGH QUESTIONS

A few years back, a mom who went by “TXBlue08” penned an essay that set the Internet buzzing: “Why I Raise My Children Without God.” An atheist, she outlined several reasons why she had decided to stop perpetuating what she sees as the “illogical legend of God” with her kids. While some found her article offensive, I think her critiques of religion are important to listen to. Several of her questions are good ones, and many of her criticisms are valid.

Yet ultimately, I believe the claims of atheism ring hollow. Unlike TXBlue08, I've chosen to

raise my kids within the church and Christian tradition. And, unlike what some may suggest about Christian faith, it's not because I've been fooled by a myth or because I simply need a "crutch" like God or a fictional heaven in order to feel good about life.

So why do I raise my kids to believe in God?

Because we are more than blood and bones. Atheism offers us this inevitable conclusion: we humans are ultimately nothing more than blood and bones, animated matter, carbon and water and nitrogen. Our sense of "self" is merely a perception caused by the snapping neurons of our brain. But this naturalist view of the world discounts what cultures worldwide, on every continent and throughout the centuries, have all acknowledged through various expressions of religion, mythology, poetry, and art: there is a *spiritual* side of life. We humans are more than mere matter, and this life is one of joy, longing, beauty, and a searching after truth. I raise my children with God because I affirm what they inherently experience to be true: life is imbued with meaning that strict naturalism cannot even come *close* to explaining.

Because of human dignity. I raise my kids with God because I want them to deep-down-in-the-gut know that *every* human life is sacred. From the fetus in the womb to the physically or mentally disabled to the elderly and infirm, Christianity affirms the essential dignity and significance of every human life. This pro-life understanding is about much more than opposing abortion; Scripture's radical assertion that all humans are made in the [image of God](#) is what led people such as Martin Luther King Jr. and his fellow civil rights activists to fight against racist Jim Crow laws and Mother Teresa to tend the sores of outcast, "untouchable" lepers. It's what mobilizes throngs of Christians today to actively combat [human trafficking](#) and what unites [environmentally-concerned Christians](#) in an effort to fight [climate change](#) and its [devastating effects](#) among the world's poor and marginalized. This belief in human dignity is particularly critical as I raise daughters in a world still fraught with sexism. As a follower of the Christ who boldly confronted sexist cultural taboos, I aim to raise my daughters with confidence in their own God-given value.

Because we need to face ourselves. No matter how much we may try to evade or ignore it, the reality is that each of us will experience moments in which we're [horrified by ourselves](#). We've lost our patience, acted selfishly, profoundly hurt another, or done something we're deeply ashamed of. Though I believe essential God-made good exists in every human being, a worldview that lacks an acknowledgment of what Christianity calls *sin* is inconsistent with actual human experience. Along with the message I repeatedly share—that God deeply loves them—my kids also need to know that Scripture speaks the truth about the human condition: we're all broken, prone to self-centeredness, and in deep need of [grace](#).

Because Christianity compels us *beyond* ourselves. TXBlue08 and other skeptics rightly critique narcissistic religiosity . . . but of course so does the Bible! God invites us, over and over



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in Scripture, to forego selfish ambition, to live in humility, and to focus on servicing and caring for the needs of others. In a sickeningly me-me-me world, Christianity demands we see that life is *not* all about us, or about accumulating the most toys, or winning the rat race. Instead, God calls us to help those in need, to speak out for victims of injustice, to offer compassion to the hurting, to welcome the stranger. And so I aim to keep journeying, with my children, on the path away from self-centered living ever toward a more Christlike way of being.

Because I love my children, I share my faith life. I could elucidate dozens more reasons why I reject the conclusions of atheism, but instead I'd point you toward philosophers and apologists like Plantinga, McGrath, Horn, Chesterton, Pascal, and countless others for a more rigorous discussion. But ultimately, I choose to raise my children with God because it is the truest way of sharing who I am and what I've come to believe about this world.

I agree with atheists like TXBlue08 in their rejection of pithy or noxious expressions of religion. I too think that parents should *not* feed their children a superficial myth or what Christian theology professor Roger E. Olson, in his book *Questions to All Your Answers*, calls "folk religion"—a pop Christianity based on cheesy, over-used clichés and feel-good, seemingly spiritual hogwash. I, too, refuse to pass on to my children a two-dimensional folktale faith that can't stand up to the test of real life.

But there's more—*much more*—to Christianity than the folk-religion stereotype perpetuated in the media and critiqued by popular atheists. There's a robust intellectual tradition, a compelling history of profound contribution to the liberal arts and the sciences, and a philosophical and theological canon that does *not* turn a blind eye to the tough questions but rather engages them with biblical acumen, rigorous scholarship, and spiritual honesty.

I believe in God in faith, but certainly not blind faith. Unlike the stereotype of unthinking, unquestioning automaton believers that atheists and agnostics *rightly* reject, the God I believe in welcomes honest human questioning and is present in this world with divine fingerprints all over it. The God I believe in doesn't ask us to fear or reject science but rather to welcome and pursue scientific discovery as an avenue of learning more about God and about God's world. And the God I believe in does *not* offer superficial pat answers to the deepest of human sufferings but rather is present with us in our suffering and offers us a real spiritual hope.

Why do I raise my kids with God? Because in a world of pain and confusion, echoing with questions but also brimming with wonder and beauty, I find Christianity to be the sonorous ringing answer to the deepest questions of the human condition, resonating with truth where secular humanism rings hollow.

Kelli B. Trujillo is editor of *Today's Christian Woman*. Follow her on Twitter at [@kbtrujillo](#) and [@TWomancom](#).

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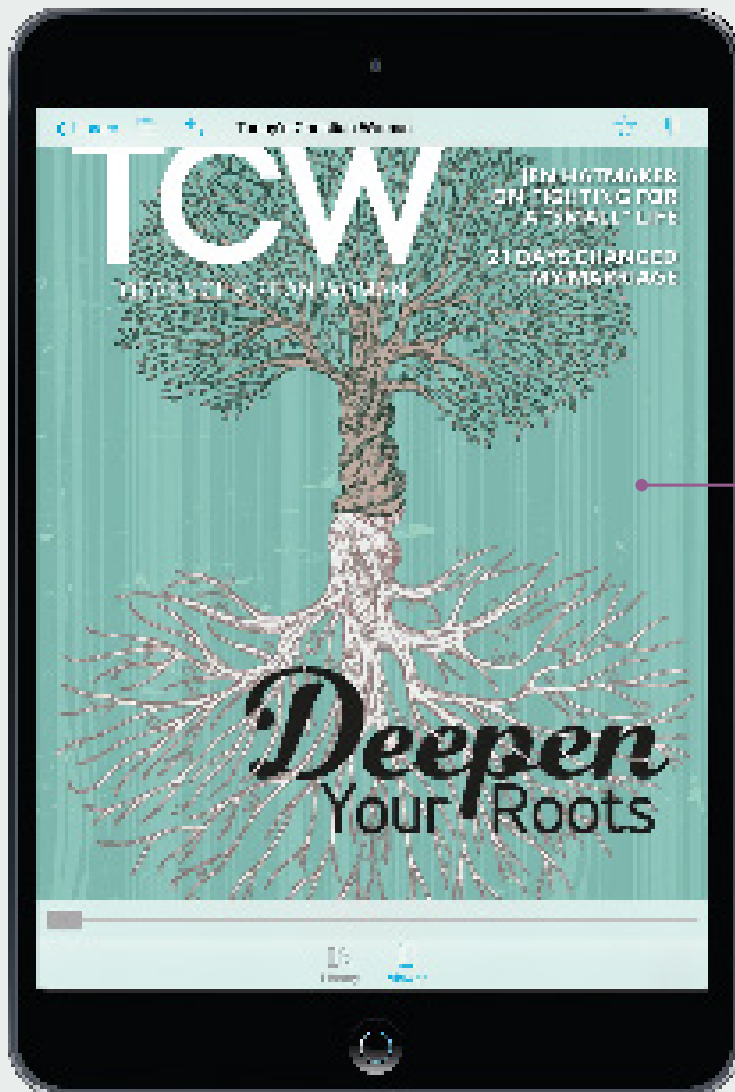
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