

## I DON'T WANT TO GROW UP

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### *Domesticating Jesus by My Own Immature Faith*

MEET BOB. He's a lot like me (and you). Perhaps if I tell you about Bob, you'll find his trouble a bit amusing, and any lessons that Bob learns along the way can be ours also. Of course, there's the added benefit that you won't throw this book across the room quite so fast, 'cause I'm just talking about our friend Bob and not singling out anyone else by name. Got it?

Right.

Bob. Bob Christian. Thirty-four. One wife, Sally. Two kids, Bobby Jr. and Beth Ann. Bob and Sally met during college where he studied architecture and she got her bachelor's degree in nursing. They have a big house, a bigger mortgage, two cars, a wellness center membership; they play golf and tennis at a private club and dine out weekly at their favorite little country inn just outside of town. The children are in private school,

although every fall Sally feels a little guilty that she doesn't have the energy to homeschool the kids. He's a Rotarian, and she is a member of a book club and shows their house (Bob's design, of course) on the home and garden tour every spring, an event that raises money for the pediatric unit at the county hospital. With their dual income, they've had a chance to vacation in Jamaica during the Michigan winter and take at least one snow skiing trip each of the last four years. They are planning a trip to Europe this summer after Bobby Jr.'s soccer camp.

Bob's partner is Muslim; his secretary is a Buddhist.

And, oh yeah, Bob's a Christian. At least that's the box he checked on the last census. They don't attend church like they used to. Bob always needs Sundays to sleep in. They write a check to the United Way every year and give their pocket change to Beth Ann to drop in a bell ringer's bucket for the Salvation Army.

They have no idea how today is going to change their lives. A jagged rip through the gentle fabric that has become their security is on its way.

But before I introduce you to the tragedy that is their appointed destiny, let me back up a bit. Just how did Bob and Sally come to call themselves Christian?

Bob was ten years old when he went forward at a revival meeting held in the First Baptist Church where his parents attended. That's when he "asked Jesus into his heart." Since that time, he's grown very little in his faith. In fact, other than holding steadfastly to the "once saved, always saved" doctrine that his father said is beyond debate, he knows little of the Bible at all. He prays with his family before dinner on the few nights a week that the family has time to sit together. Perhaps you know the prayer he uses. "God is great, God is good, now we thank him for our food." Sometimes they get Bobby Jr. to

say the prayer. He says it so fast that the whole family has been known to laugh.

Bob learned most of what he knows about Jesus from his parents. While they were sincere, they were of the belief that since they took Bob to Sunday school, he would absorb everything he needed there. Time at home was for real-world learning, and unfortunately his parents failed to model an integration of the Christian faith beyond Sunday mornings.

Holidays were important to Bob's family as he grew up, and they even attended the Christmas and Easter pageant put on at their local church. But mostly Christmas was all about the gifts (and not *the gift*), and Easter was all about finding the large chocolate bunny that his mother would hide for him (after all, he was too Christian to believe in the Easter Bunny).

Bob's father was a product of the Great Depression, a lift-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps sort of fellow. Quiet. Self-made. A man who rose from nothing to run a small chain of grocery stores that he sold last year to Food Lion. The real preaching that Bob took home from his father was an ethic of hard work, little play, and an honest day's wage for an honest effort. His father always told him, "If you do it yourself, you know it will be done right."

Is Bob a true Christian? He certainly thinks he is and would argue 'til he's blue in the face about theological issues about which he knows little.

But he's not a real Christian. How do I know?

Because I made him up. If he was a real person, I could honestly say that only God knows the heart. Jesus gave us some criteria for judging another's life by looking at the fruit, but he also made it clear in parables that there are tares among the wheat and that we might not find out who is real and who is phony until the harvest.

Bob is living under the delusion that repeating a prayer to ask Jesus into his heart was the only magic he needed to provide an escape from hell.

When crisis hits Bob's family, where is he likely to turn for help?

We will soon see.

## **An American Tragedy**

Every day an American (and worldwide) Christian tragedy is played out in thousands of lives. So many have come to Christ, made an initial commitment with a child's understanding, and then stagnated. Sometimes the decision was real. Other times it was simply to please parents or a Sunday school teacher. Some, like Bob, hold earnestly to their salvation as if clutching a get-out-of-jail-free card if death sneaks up and surprises him or her early.

In a recent example of drivel coming from Hollywood, the protagonist of *Talladega Nights* prays to "Dear baby Jesus."

If only Hollywood's parody didn't strike so close to home.

Christians whose faith has remained infantile will rarely integrate their faith into the center of who they are. Christ is ornamental, a baby in a manger scene. Jesus is domesticated in their minds, because he's never grown up. More accurately, our understanding of his power, his glory, our understanding of grace and truth has been stymied far short of reality. It's a problem as old as the church. The writer of the book of Hebrews laments.

About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again

the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. (Hebrews 5:11–14)

On Easter morning back when my boys were small, the three of them shared one bedroom. As I was taking call for the weekend, I needed to leave for the hospital, but I wanted to spend a little time reading to the boys about the significant event that we were celebrating before I went off to work. I read to them from a modern version of the Bible, telling the story of the resurrection. I read the section from the book of John where Peter and John entered the garden tomb. As I reached the end of the sentence, I raised my voice so that they would understand I was asking a fill-in-the-blank question. “They went into the tomb and they did not find the \_\_\_\_.” I stopped and looked at my boys for the answer.

Without hesitating, my then-three-year-old yelled, “The eggs!”

I sighed. And laughed. My young son had the American version of Easter down pat.

Another Sunday morning when Sam was about the same age, he looked up at me during a church service and pointed at our pastor. “Is that God?”

To understand what happened next, you need a little background. Sam couldn’t get his small mouth adequately around the word “girl.” It always came out sounding like “grill.”

I understood Sam’s dilemma. I’m sure we had used the phrase “God’s house” when referring to the church building. “No,” I whispered. “God is not a man.”

Sam's little face twisted with concern. A moment later, he had apparently figured it out but decided to confirm it with me. "He's a grill?"

We laugh at our children's understanding. We cherish every baby step, even when they stumble, because that's how *babies* are supposed to act and speak.

Unfortunately for Bob and for many in the church, the tragedy of growth failure is lost on them. They cling to a few infantile notions of faith and fail to see how it could be relevant to the important issues of day-to-day success and survival.

My children are now entering the age where they are leaving the nest for college. I remember my reaction at dropping my firstborn off at the U.S. Air Force Academy. Parents all around us were crying, hugging their sons and daughters before handing them over to Uncle Sam for basic training. Mothers were more verbal to be sure, but I saw plenty of fathers brushing back tears.

Joel stood under a sign that said, "Parents' Last Look," a placard that noted the separation point.

I reached for him one last time. Just the day before, it seemed, I had cradled him in my arms and rocked him to sleep. As he hugged me, he obviously didn't trust me not to make a scene. The message he gave me was clear: Don't cry. Let's be men about this.

"It's just summer camp, Dad," Joel said. "Summer camp." Knowing what was ahead, perhaps he was trying to convince himself.

I hugged him close and held back the emotions threatening to erupt.

Later, having watched him board a bus to be taken to the gold footprints (where the incoming basic cadets are taught how to stand at attention for the first time), I drove away in my rental car with the road blurring from my tears. For twenty-four hours

after that until I boarded a plane and left Colorado Springs, the knot in my throat and the threat of tears were never far beneath the surface.

As hard as it is to let our children go, imagine our distress *if they never left home*. Worse yet, imagine if they never grew up at all. What would it be like to spoon-feed, dress, bathe, and diaper our children into their teens? Or twenties? Or for a lifetime?

Have I allowed my understanding of Christ's power, his grace, and his love for me to mature throughout my Christian life?

Over and over the writers of the New Testament compare our growth as Christians with the growth and maturation of our physical bodies. "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation" (1 Peter 2:2).

Again I turn introspective, asking myself, *Am I growing in my knowledge of Christ?* Am I hungry for spiritual food that will nourish my stagnant soul? Or have I allowed my concept of Jesus to remain the same so that complacency has replaced expectation? If suddenly some magical unveiling of my level of spiritual maturity occurred, how would I appear to others? A toddler stumbling around in an ill-fitting adult suit?

I promise you, if we could gain a glimpse of Christ in the reality of his power, we would never yawn.

Unfortunately for Bob, and for many nominal Christians, Christ has remained peripheral, a child in a manger whom we reference at holidays, and perhaps in a repetitious prayer at mealtime. He certainly isn't in the place of reverence and centrality that he deserves.

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Cute baby in the manger. Doesn't make any demands on my personal life. Doesn't say hard things about commitment and suffering. Smiles and coos and stays right where I put him, and doesn't complain when he's ignored all week long.

Things are about to get very tough for Bob and Sally. Let's hope their concept of Jesus can grow to meet their need.