

Todd D. Hunter

Foreword by Eugene H. Peterson

CHRISTIANITY BEYOND BELIEF

Following Jesus for the Sake of Others



IVP Books

An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

CONTENTS

Foreword by Eugene Peterson 9

Acknowledgments. 13

PART ONE: A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHRISTIAN

1 What If You Knew You Were Going to Live Tomorrow?
The Problem with Getting “Saved” 17

2 Jesus’ Surprising Gospel
It’s the Kingdom Now, Not Just Heaven Later 33

3 It’s Our Life That Counts
Aligning with God’s Story. 49

4 The Role of the Church
Jesus Is Not Just Your Personal Savior 63

PART TWO: A NEW WAY TO LIVE

5 Cooperative Friends of Jesus
Maybe Jesus Didn’t Intend to Start a World Religion 75

6 Consistent Lives of Creative Goodness
Apologetics of Another Kind 93

7 For the Sake of Others
Jesus Could Have Done Backflips on a Donkey 109

8	Through the Power of the Holy Spirit <i>No Big Hair, No Bizarre Behavior, Just Power for a Purpose</i>	127
9	Inviting Others to Live a New Way <i>A Fresh Approach to Sharing Our Faith</i>	143
10	Three Is Enough Groups <i>A New Way to Live</i>	157
	Appendix 1—Triads: The Theoretical Basis for Three Is Enough Groups	173
	Appendix 2—The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit	179
	Appendix 3— <i>The Message</i> : A New Testament Tour of Life	185
	Notes	195

WHAT IF YOU KNEW YOU WERE GOING TO LIVE TOMORROW?

The Problem with Getting “Saved”

Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we've been given a brand-new life and have everything to live for, including a future in heaven—and the future starts now! . . . As obedient children, let yourselves be pulled into a way of life shaped by God's life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness. . . . Your life is a journey you must travel with a deep consciousness of God.

1 PETER 1:3-4, 14, 18

When I was a teenager in middle-class Santa Ana, California, my peers tended to fall into one of two categories. My honest, though admittedly dim, memory is that we tended to be pursuing either (1) sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, or (2) Jesus. I know because I lived my rebellious teen years in the cradle of the Jesus Movement. In high school my friends were converting to Christ at what I thought was a troubling and disquieting rate. They were listening to Jesus music and watching Jesus movies in a tent at a place called Calvary Chapel, which was on the border of Santa Ana and Costa Mesa. Though I was somewhat

culturally religious, I just couldn't see why anyone would give up sex, drugs or rock for Jesus and his music.

In the early 1970s one of the most well-known bumper stickers on the VWs in Orange County was "JESUS LIVES!" I'd see it daily, and some days I wondered, *What does it mean that Jesus lives? In what sense? No one says they see him walking the streets. In what manner does he live? Does he have a body, or what?*

At times, perhaps in more reflective moments, I wondered, *If Jesus does live, what difference does it make to me? How would his living today make a difference to me?* As 1 Peter 1 states, I wondered, *How might Jesus' present life pull me into a new way of life?* I had some knowledge of Jesus' virgin birth, death and resurrection, but I couldn't wrap my head around the importance of Jesus being alive today. Some of the young converts around me seemed to be changed by the idea that Jesus rose from the dead. But still I wondered how that bit of historical information, so central to Christian thought, might draw me into a new way of life. I didn't think about it much, but when I did, I figured, intuitively, that Jesus' "now" life had to be about more than something he said or did thousands of years ago.

FINDING A LIFE WORTH LIVING

My adolescence was shaped by a singular event: the death of my older brother, Dennis, in Vietnam. Thinking back, I remember that the "conflict" in Vietnam hung over U.S. culture like the deep fog that sometimes envelops coastal Southern California. It was hard to see where the world was headed. At the time I was clueless about most of this—after all, I had Pony League Baseball games and not getting caught for "this and that" to worry about.

My life was interrupted on a typically great-weather spring Saturday in 1969. The world seemed good to a naive thirteen-year-old boy. There was lots of excited talk of men walking on the moon, Woodstock marked a whole generation, the movie *Midnight Cowboy* was wor-

rying many people, and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* entertained me and my friends. Best of all, to my mind, a small circus had come to town and was set up a couple of blocks from my home.

As I'd soon come to see, this was also to become the strangest and most tragic of all childhood days. Innocent and in pursuit of simple fun, I left home to walk to the circus, gawking at the various acts. Little did I know that while I was viewing one spectacle, a scene of another sort had broken out at my house. Innocence was soon to be lost.

Leaving the circus and walking a block or so up our typical tree-lined street, I could see that our driveway and both sides of the street in front of our yellow, shrub-fronted house was packed with cars. It looked like a neighbor was having a birthday party or something. But the crowd was at *my* house. And it wasn't a party—no one was laughing. They were crying. Crying doesn't do justice to how I remember my mom. I remember something more like the phrase from the Bible: “unspeakable yearning, wordless moans and groaning heartache too deep for utterance.”

But what do you expect from a mother who has just heard that her beloved son has been killed and that “we'll be sending home as much of his body as we can”? *As much of his body!* How do you process that? I wonder if she pictured his little hands playing with toys, or his greasy hands working on a '56 Chevy? Just what parts would be coming home?

I think I was stunned into an emotional shutdown that, to some degree, I have had to fight my way out of ever since. I have no clear memory of how I felt at the moment I walked through the front door. It all hit me later. I remember being somewhere—it seems to me it was a military base—and hearing a commendation read of my brother. He had been awarded the bronze and silver stars for bravery in battle. The commendation said something very close to this: “Corporal Hunter left the safety of his foxhole to engage the enemy in a crossfire. In so doing he saved many men. In this selfless action he was hit by a mortar shell and killed.”

I remember thinking in my crude way: *That's the biggest bunch of bull I've ever heard in my life!* He had only been there a few weeks. Why would the same guy who, on the one hand, used to beat on me in the backyard—me, his brother—on the other hand, *die* for a bunch of guys he hardly knew? And for a cause the nightly news said was a waste?

I was really angry and confused. For months or years, I can't remember, I had recurring dreams of sneaking off to Vietnam to kill "those gooks," as they were nastily labeled in those days, those people who killed my brother. In my dreams I hid away in a plane to sneak over to Vietnam; others times my hideaway was a boat. I don't remember ever getting there, in my dreams, and actually pulling it off. The dreams always ended in frustration. This time of intense, bitter and perplexing resentment hit its peak, in all places, in the courtyard of a typical little Methodist church, which my family attended. The people of the church had decided to give tribute to my brother by erecting a flagpole in his honor in the grassy area of the courtyard.

If hearing the commendation read at the military base was a trigger, seeing the unveiled plaque on the flagpole set a bomb off in me. The commemorative inscription said in part: "Greater love hath no man than this, that [he] lay down his life for his friends." I remember thinking, *Oh great, now they are bringing God into it, as if he had anything to do with it!* I remember, deep within myself, cursing the idea that there was anything worth dying for—especially for what, to my naive young mind, was a stupid war. I remember saying to God, *I don't believe this. I don't believe you; I don't believe you have anything to do with this or any part of these horrible circumstances.* I think my inward response was actually a lot worse than that. I know it was really bad, but the memories have faded.

I don't recall hearing any clear response from God, just a gracious silence. In hindsight I think the grace must have been mixed with a big dose of understanding. I recollect walking from the ceremony with the uneasy feeling that I had not succeeded in putting God in his place.

I remember thinking that the episode was probably not the end of a conversation that had begun with God.

The next big episode came about six years later. By now it was 1976 and I was nineteen, playing baseball in college. A player on the team repeatedly asked me to go to church with him. He said the music would be cool. He bugged me about it so much that I finally said to Debbie, my then girlfriend, now my wife, “Oh let’s just go. What can happen at church?”

My friend was right; the music was cool. The message was simple, clear and Bible-based, easy for a nineteen-year-old to understand. At the end of the talk an invitation was given to raise our hands if we wanted to respond to what we had just heard, to become a follower of Jesus.

The pews in this church were packed with young people. Built to seat eight, each pew had at least ten crammed in. In fact, people were sitting on the floor and in folding chairs outside. Debbie and I were so close together that I could notice when she twitched a muscle. I was really paying attention, because I wanted to feel if she raised her hand. She didn’t, and neither did I. A moment later the people who raised their hands were asked to come to the front of the church “to give your life to Jesus.” Neither of us went forward, but something happened that night. Debbie and I talked about it on the way back from church.

The next morning I bumped into my friend at the baseball office. I told him that something had happened to me that I couldn’t understand or explain, but that I wanted to go back to church the next Sunday and go forward like other people had done. Debbie and I went back the next week and experienced the exact same routine: cool music, easily understood message and an invitation to become followers of Jesus. This time we both raised our hands and walked to the altar. In fact, we leaped up. We were the first to the front of the church, standing right in front of the pulpit.

As the evangelist began to lead us in a prayer, asking for forgiveness and committing our lives to God, the whole episode of my brother came flashing into my mind. I heard the God I had yelled at six years ago say to me: “Todd, this is it. This is what is worth laying down your life for—to follow me for the sake of others as your brother followed his instinct to rescue his trapped comrades.” Along this path, I was led to believe, I would find the real and everlasting life. In that moment I knew that Jesus did in fact live, as the bumper stickers and my friends attested. He lived and lives the most compelling and interesting life imaginable. His life, life in the kingdom as the Son of God, is our model for eternal life.

CHRISTIANITY IS A LIFE

I’ve arranged this book in two parts so we—writer with reader—can stay connected. In this first section I’ll suggest a new understanding of what it means to be a Christian. In part two I’ll set forth a way of doing life connected with this new understanding. Reading what I’ve just typed sounds like it could be overreaching—maybe even naive. I think we are safe, however. I know that I’m not saying anything new. Frankly, that would be too bold for me! But I also know that what we are about to consider together will sound new to many of you. Nevertheless this is, in my opinion, a point of view worth considering. I know it has been good for me and thousands of others I have known.

Somehow, in the years after the dramatic events surrounding the death of my brother and my conversion, I became drastically inconsistent. I was a backward or reverse hypocrite. Instead of preaching more than I was living, I was living more than my preaching communicated. I was living an amazing and exciting spiritual adventure, full of risk and growth and religious escapades. But in hindsight, my explanation of the gospel was shriveled. I used to think that eternal life was what we got after we died. (Today, I know better—new life, a different kind of life, *starts* at conversion and it *never ends*.)

I am not sure how this inadvertent, two-faced disconnect got such a foothold in my life. Perhaps it has to do with the environments in which I was converted and lived my earliest days as a Christian. They were marked by an amazing presence of God. Literally every Sunday dozens of young people my age were turning to faith. The Bible teaching was startling in its simplicity and power. It was clear that many people were having authentic, undeniable interactions with the Holy Spirit. The gifts of the Spirit were flowing, people were being healed, others were delivered from drug addictions, families were being put back together, and messed-up teenagers were giving up patterns of sin.

Looking back, it seems like I was living in a remarkable bubble. But at some point the bubble burst. It may have burst on the pin of ignorance—a simple lack of knowledge. Imagine that the first people to make and experience the benefits of fire didn't realize that sparks from the stones they struck together had started the kindling glowing? I think something like that was going on in our lives. We experienced huge benefits, but either we never thought about the reason, or we thought about it in ways that sabotaged us in the long term.

After decades of being a follower of Jesus and a pastor, I recognize at least one place I went wrong. As 1 Peter 1 says, Christianity is about “a brand-new life.” This new life does indeed have an unspeakably marvelous future. But that future starts *now*. Though we were catching glimpses of the future in our present lives, because of our lack of knowledge our focus was still mostly on the life to come. Our ignorance reminds me of when Paul asks some people in Ephesus if they received the Holy Spirit when they believed. They reply that they had not even heard of the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:1-2). In parallel maybe we would have said, “Eternal life in this life? No, we have never even heard of it.”

Yet that is exactly what Christianity is about: a certain kind of life—eternal life. It is about living in alliance with the gospel Jesus

announced concerning the kingdom of God. Or as Peter says, it is a “way of life shaped by God’s life.” Christianity is a journey: following Jesus’ model of life in the kingdom through the power of the Holy Spirit in the actual events of our lives.

But this kind of followership cannot happen when our imaginations* are shaped by the notion that eternal life is “out there, somewhere beyond the stars, after I die.” Nor is it merely about length of life or ongoing existence. Even dead things can continue to exist—just look out the window. I’ll bet you’ll see a dead plant, tree or weed that keeps “existing.”

I think you’ll agree with me that mere existence is not what God intends by eternal life. Rather than being spatial or chronological, eternal life is qualitative. It is a different kind of life. Peter says, “Your new life is not like your old life” (1 Peter 1:23). Eternal life is a special quality of life. Though this new kind of life affects the afterlife, it cannot be reduced to it. It’s something new that replaces the old.

The clearest statement in the Scripture regarding eternal life shows it is fundamentally about a type of life. In John 17:3, Jesus says that eternal life is knowledge of God and his Son. As important as good thinking is, the knowledge Jesus refers to is not merely thinking about or mental agreement with a certain set of doctrines. Eternal life is the quality life derived from and lived within the kingdom of God. It is personal, intimate community with the Trinity. It is the kind of life, which was lost due to sin, that God always intended for humanity. In fact, sin is the counterintention of humans to live

*I use the term *imagination* frequently in this book. I do so because I am convinced that people live from their imaginations, not from facts or data, as important as they are. A young girl spends hours practicing before a mirror, checking her posture and so forth, because she has a vision of—imagines—being on the silver screen. We know the same pattern hold true for athletes. I don’t read the Bible to merely gather facts, though they are there. I read it to shape my imagination about what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

outside of God's story, outside of a new kind of life.

Most people who realize that Jesus lives *experience* it before they grasp it as a true idea. Though doctrine is important for other reasons, we don't need a perfect understanding of the incarnation or the atonement to experience God's gift of eternal life. Something better and more life-shaping is available: a rock-solid knowledge that you have interacted with Jesus, that you have felt his presence and heard his voice in a way that is real to you. His presence and voice are creative. They inaugurate and sustain a new kind of life—eternal life.

That Christianity is about a new, creative and eternal kind of life is crucial and brightly illuminating. As we move through the remaining chapters of this book, I hope this idea will move you to ask a few revealing questions that have been helpful to me as I've processed the notion of Christianity as "a brand-new life . . . that starts now . . . and is lived in deep consciousness of God" (1 Peter 1). Presently, as I think about how best to express Christianity, I think of these questions:

- If we knew we were going to live tomorrow and for a long time thereafter, if we believed we were eternal beings by nature, what would we do?
- Who would we follow?
- Around what narrative would we organize the various aspects of our life?

As we answer these questions, we determine the kind of life we will live. We decide the kind of persons we will become eternally. These questions lead us beyond wondering where we go when we die. They lead us to a life that never ends—not even death can kill life in Jesus' kingdom.

THE PROBLEM WITH GETTING "SAVED"

Every seat in the arena was full, the place was buzzing with anticipation. The crowd had experienced a full night of music. They heard a

message designed to convince them that they were sinners in the eyes of God. The preacher explained the importance of having our sins forgiven so that we would be accepted by God into heaven. Testimonials were presented about the effects of “inviting Jesus into your heart.” Everyone knew the crucial moment had come as the evangelist neared the big emotional crescendo of his sermon and the altar call: “Is your eternal destiny secure? If you walked out of here tonight and got ran over by truck and killed, do you know where you would go? Would you go to heaven or hell?”

I’m not picking on anybody with this stereotypical sound bite. I’ve said words to that effect hundreds of times in my life. I bring it up to help us start thinking about the nature of Christian life. It seems to me that many Christians have been imagining the wrong story concerning God and his people, and thus they come up with less-than-helpful ways of thinking about the Christian life.

The story these sound bites lead to is one in which the forgiveness of sin is the sole plot line. The plot line moves toward the final resolution of “who goes to heaven and who goes to hell.” Those bumper-sticker bits of theology say that the only essential thing happening between God and humans is mere forgiveness. Let’s stop and think about these simple and common ways of explaining Christianity.

Here is the first problem: that story very rarely produces actual *followers* of Jesus. At best it produces “forgiven people”—and even then I think forgiveness is only understood in a very shallow way. I believe that in responding to Jesus, people do not merely receive forgiveness of sins so they can go to heaven. Rather, they are forgiven so they can begin a different kind of life, a cooperative relationship with God, a new and eternal kind of life right now (which ultimately includes heaven).

But if the gospel and eternal life have to do with our life on earth, maybe we have misunderstood even basic terms like *sin*. Perhaps the issue in the Garden of Eden was not *sin* as we usually think about it—sex, alcohol, drugs or forbidden fruit, and popular media’s ex-

plotation of them. I think the issue may have been more about sin as rebellion; at issue is a decision to take the first step on a path away from God—to try to become our own god. To sin in biblical terms means “to miss the mark” (God’s bulls-eye), “to go your own way,” “to take the wrong road,” “defiance of (God’s) intention,” “to stray from the correct path.” It means to ignore or fight against God’s story and his intention for us.

Those definitions alert us that there is a lot more going on in God’s story than just forgiving or punishing sins. God really wants us to become his cooperative friends and co-laborers—working with God in the routines of our new life. Far from trying to make forgiveness less important in the Christian story, my aim is to show that understanding sin in the context of God’s story is crucial to forming a new life, a cooperative friendship with God. I want us to see forgiveness as a starting line, a threshold to a new, fully human life. In my experience, forgiveness is often viewed as a finishing line, with a “whew” and a wipe of the brow while thinking *I’m in*. I have no quarrel with the notion that forgiveness gets us in. But I want to emphasize that it gets us into a new life story, not merely into heaven when we die.

The new life story God is writing for us is this: he intends to have a people on earth who happily, easily and routinely embody, announce, and demonstrate the rule and reign of his kingdom. Failing to value this overarching story, this wider context, is what betrays most of our thinking about what it means to be a Christian.

As you’ve undoubtedly heard, context is pivotal. “Hit the bat” means one thing on a baseball diamond but something entirely different in the flying mammals section of the zoo. “I’m saved” means one thing in the context of a story about “going to heaven when you die.” It means something completely different in the eternal drama in which we are invited, as followers of Jesus, to live on earth under the rule and reign of God (and later go to heaven).

Picture this common scene: Your father asks you to do a few chores after you get home from school one Friday afternoon. He and Mom are working until 5 p.m. and special dinner guests will be arriving at 6. Dad is counting on your faithfulness in order to achieve his goal of hosting and serving others. But as you get a ride home from school that Friday, someone suggests a quick trip to the mall. Because you'd like something new to wear to the game that night, you agree to go. On the way home—at 5:30—you remember your father's request, which you had agreed to.

Of course when you see your father, he doesn't even have to say anything; you see disappointment and anger on his face. You apologize, he forgives you, and his face changes. But his goal is not accomplished merely in your act of sorrow and regret, and his forgiveness. People are still coming to dinner; the dining room still needs to be picked up and vacuumed, the good dishes need to be fetched from the china hutch, the table set, and so on.

That kind of cooperative father-child relationship is the will (goal) of God. He desires to have a renewed humanity who participates in his plan to restore creation. God's story cannot be reduced merely to the forgiveness of sins. Yes, sin is a big part of the divine-human story, but sin and forgiveness are not the whole story, which is about being the cooperative friends of Jesus, creatively seeking to do good for the sake of others through the power of the Holy Spirit.

You will read these four phrases throughout this book:



cooperative friends of Jesus



living in creative goodness



for the sake of others



through the power of the Holy Spirit

For me these are something like a new “Four Spiritual Laws”—a brief, four-pronged way of introducing someone to what it means to be a Christian. Once people catch that vision and begin to follow Jesus, all the rest will come into play: sin, grace, forgiveness, repentance, the cross, resurrection and so forth. We can’t go down the path marked by these four phrases without all of orthodox Christian teaching coming into view. I am indebted to Dallas Willard for the first two phrases. I have mulled over these two phrases—and the two I added—and spoken to others about them for ten years now. They have not let me down. They have the potential to shape a person’s imagination—inspired, gifted and animated by the Holy Spirit—for following Jesus, leading to living a life of creative goodness for the sake of others.

MADE, MARRED AND MENDED

I hope by now you will agree that there is more going on in the Christian story than the often-seen bumper-sticker claim of “Just Forgiven.” We need an image for how to move beyond forgiveness. Think of a thermometer: negative numbers on the bottom half, zero in the middle and positive numbers on the top half. We all come to God starting below zero, in debt. Contemporary Christians are pretty clear about how our negatives or demerits are taken care of—justification by faith, which is a gracious gift of God.

But how do we move from zeroed accounts, which allow entrance into heaven, to the positive lifestyle of following Jesus? Contemporary Christians, who are often ensnared by fear of works, legalism or religiosity, have a hard time imagining this. (It’s been humorously asserted that all Christians are saved by grace, and many of us are paralyzed by it as well!) We carry on the same way we got in—through unmerited grace and through the power of the Holy Spirit, another gracious gift. But we must be clear here; there is something for Christians to do—to faithfully embody the kingdom story of God. This involves

cooperation, but it does not earn salvation.

Perhaps a rhetorical question would help clear our thinking: Who do you suppose appropriates more grace in a God-honoring way: someone who merely experiences forgiveness, or someone like the apostle Paul, who said, “I worked harder than anyone, but it wasn’t me; it was the grace of God in me” (1 Corinthians 15:10, my paraphrase). Think too of Paul’s famous words in Philippians that he regarded all things as loss because of the overarching value of following Jesus (Philippians 3:7). Was Paul confused about what it meant to be a Christian? Was he trying to earn his way into heaven by such focused and passionate behavior? Or was he, as I suggest, in the grip of a story that had shaped both his imagination and behavior?

I’ve long been a fan of Billy Graham. I used to collect Graham’s sermons. One in particular set forward his vision of God’s intention for Christians. It gives us a rationale for moving beyond mere forgiveness. It is titled “Made, Marred and Mended.”

In my recollection, the sermon showed why God *made* humans in the first place—to be his cooperative friends, working with him to redeem the earth and its people—both in this life and in the age to come. But this God-imagined, agape-based “doing good for others” objective is *marred* by rebellion, self-will and all manner of sin. God then *mends* us. This starts with leading us, by grace, to repentance and forgiving us of our sins. But it only starts there. Having sin-fixed humans was not God’s original motivation for creating, nor was it his ultimate intention for humankind. This is obviously true. Sin came after God asked humans to be his cooperative friends (Genesis 2–3). Rather, we are mended so that we can get back in the game of life as God’s cooperative friends.

If being mended to live in the plan of God is the main objective of Christianity, then what about heaven and hell in a story that goes beyond sound-bite, bumper-sticker theology? If what I have said so far is true, can you see how heaven and hell, while real, are not the most important points? Here is a subversive but illuminating thought:

What if the function of heaven in the biblical story is destination, not goal? The goal of Christianity is not arriving in heaven upon death. The goal is spiritual transformation into Christlikeness. That makes heaven simply the destination of God's cooperative friends, the people who love him and what he is up to on the earth. Hell then is just the opposite, a cosmic place for those who want nothing to do with God or his plan, will, story and intention.

RAPTURE OR REVOLUTION?

As a young Christian I didn't think much of this life mattered. I was just waiting for the rapture—the snatching up of God's people to heaven before the Great Tribulation—the time of worldwide trouble. I take responsibility for this. I don't blame any of my early teachers. But here is the deal: it doesn't make sense to pursue spiritual transformation for the sake of being God's cooperative friends when the only things that matter are associated with the life to come.

The unfolding of my life—a wife, kids, a home—began to soften those views. Later, as I began to think seriously about these things, I discovered the message of Jesus—the good news of new life in God's kingdom. Thinking through the implication of what Jesus said, not just what is said about him in the rest of the Bible, is both surprising and a launching pad for a new kind of life. And so we turn now to the astounding message of the gospel.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Thinking of the story in the beginning of the chapter, have you had an experience that led you to a “this is what life is all about” moment? If so, what was it for you?
2. This chapter argues that Christianity is about life, not just an eternally secure death. What would you do if you knew you were going to live tomorrow and for a long time after?

Who would you follow in order to learn to really live? Why?

3. What do you make of the definition of eternal life in this chapter?
How might it inform your view of what it means to be a Christian?
4. What are we saved from? What are we saved to?

How might rethinking these questions on the basis of “Made, Marred and Mended” lead to a new way of articulating what it means to be a Christian?