

Testimonial from a WordAlone Board Member

By Mike Yagley, Product Engineering Manager, Brighton, MI.

Part 1

I know this might sound odd, coming from a member of the WordAlone board, but it wasn't that long ago that I wasn't certain about the authority and power of Jesus Christ. Even more surprising, a few years before that, I was absolutely certain that Christianity was either a sham or, at best, an honest attempt by an ancient, bigoted, patriarchal culture at answering some of the most difficult questions of life. Finally, I'm very sorry to say, I was an evangelist for this view of Christianity. Whenever I got the chance, I would try to sow seeds of doubt regarding the authority of Christ and the authority of the Bible. It just seemed like the right thing to do at the time. I've never liked lies and I believed that the Bible was a lie.

How did I go from one of the few kids in my high school graduating class who regularly attended church to become an evangelist against Jesus Christ? And, an even more important question, how did I go from fighting the Bible to where I am today, a firm supporter of WordAlone's vision to equip every Christian, whether a line worker or a homemaker, an engineer or an accountant, so we can all preach, teach and confess the Word of Christ to a hurting and broken world?

I was Catholic when I was a kid, so I would go to church every Sunday to hear the priest go on for 10 or 15 minutes about what he thought this or that reading meant. I was amazed. When I read the gospels, I never got that much out of it. How could a priest take this jumble of stories and determine what is right and wrong, or good and evil? I was mystified.

Even though I considered myself to be a Christian, and went through 12 years of Catholic school, I approached the Bible just like I approached the Iliad, as an ancient text that outlined an ethical standard. As a 20-something, I had somehow decided that the Greek myths outlined the ethics for the ancient Greek culture and, I figured, the Bible outlined the ethics for western culture up until the middle of the 20th century. The thing that made the Bible different was the fact that, by my estimation, the ethical lessons of the Bible succeeded in creating a social structure that worked and the Greek myths failed.

There was one area that was especially difficult. It was the question of Jesus of Nazareth. Everybody said He was the Son of God and that this was the foundation of Christianity. I was willing to accept this at face value, but I didn't accept it on faith. Rather, I accepted it as a required assumption to understanding the deep ethical lessons that I considered to be so valuable. Put another way, I didn't have a "personal relationship" with Jesus Christ. The relationship between me and Christ was all business. I'll believe in Him and, hopefully, He'll reveal some sort of Truth to me.

When I was about thirty, I finally decided to read the Bible, seriously read the Bible, for the first time. I found the Old Testament intimidating, so I decided to do a deep dive into the gospels. I had heard an author, John Dominic Crossan, speak on the radio about his new book on the true, historical Jesus. As a young engineer, I found his approach appealing. He claimed that he and his colleagues approached the Bible like any other ancient text. He said they compared the writings of the gospels to the historical and archeological records from the period to try to figure out what had actually happened. This seemed reasonable, so I went to Border's and picked up a copy of his book, *The Historical Jesus*, to help me as I took on the ancient texts.

As I worked my way through Crossan's book, I found his logic compelling. There were obvious inconsistencies between the gospel accounts. There were also archeological gaps, areas that you would expect to see archeological or historical data that could support the Biblical record, but the archeological record was either silent or missing. At the end of the book, I couldn't help but ask, was Jesus really the Son of God, or just a courageous first century faith healer with a vision to re-order society to be more compassionate and egalitarian, as Crossan said? I was definitely leaning toward the latter. It was especially appealing because Crossan's view of Christianity would allow me to gain an understanding of the Christian ethics, but without having to make the difficult assumptions regarding the person of Jesus.

By this time, I had married Maria, a Lutheran girl, and had become Lutheran myself, since I found the Lutheran theology to be very "clean" and logical. I was most impressed by Luther's starting assumption that we are all in a lifelong struggle with original sin. This single assumption cleared up a whole host of questions I had regarding the behavior of mankind, especially religious folk. Even in my nascent faith development, I sensed that Lutheran theology seemed like the best tool to getting to the bottom of my questions regarding Christianity.

I figured I should make sure I was on the right path, so I asked my pastor about Crossan's book. He said he hadn't yet read it, but he had heard very good things about it from other pastors. I was surprised – so this was a viable Lutheran view of the truth? That worked for me. Crossan's book was logical and it was in line with my privately held beliefs. We should be compassionate. We should be loving. The only gap was that Crossan's teachings didn't really address our relationship with God, but that didn't bother me. God had never talked to me, so I had stopped talking to Him years before.

Over the next year or two, I relished every opportunity to discuss my new beliefs regarding Jesus. I challenged my wife Maria, my dad and my Christian friends to come up with a counterargument. Everybody came up short. In retrospect, I should have seen that it wasn't that my arguments were that much better, but that I had crossed a line that they were unwilling to transgress. I would have challenged my pastor too, but I had stopped going to church during this time. I decided that I could be compassionate and egalitarian, just like that ancient teacher, Jesus of Nazareth, without spending all my time and money on an outdated communication system like the church.

A couple of years later, Dr Crossan put out another book, *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography*. I bought it and read it shortly after its release. My local paper had a full page article on this new book and its controversial author. Overall, the article was extremely complimentary until the last couple of paragraphs. Here the writer mentioned that there was another highly regarded Catholic Biblical scholar, Raymond Brown, who strongly disagreed with Crossan. The article only allocated a couple of sentences to Dr Brown, however. This wasn't because the writer wanted to only show one side of the story, but because Dr Brown would only say, "If you want to know why I disagree with Crossan, read my books." So, I did.

Actually, I only read one of his books, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, which was a relatively accessible summary of Dr Brown's thoughts on the Gospel of John. There were a couple of things that jumped out at me right away. First, I was struck by Brown's humility. On almost every page, he would say, "I could be wrong here" in one way or another. This was in stark contrast to hubris that I sensed from Crossan. The second thing that impressed me was related. Brown always seemed to stay within certain boundaries. I don't recall him ever questioning the resurrection, for example. Again, this was in strong contrast to Crossan who seemed to know no bounds. (Dr Crossan even suggested that Jesus wasn't buried but was most likely torn down from the cross by dogs, as was the custom of the day.) This got me thinking. Where will I draw my boundaries as I consider the life of Jesus? Do I want to continue to side with Dr Crossan, that everything needs to be verifiable through science and reason? Or, will I be more like Dr Brown, where the stories of Christ are mostly metaphorical, but that there are some boundaries, like the resurrection? Or, would I go further than Brown? Are there other areas that Brown relegates to metaphor and myth, that I would accept as fact based on faith? Did Brown look to reason and science too much?

Part 2

Human reason and its favorite child, science, are surprisingly limited. Especially when dealing with the eternal questions, they are not only limited, but they are sometimes deceptive. As an engineer, I have come up against the limits of human reason over and over and over. We try to use reason and science to predict what will go wrong with our products, but it isn't very long before we realize that we can't account for everything in our tests and computer models.

Here's a story to illustrate my point. In one of my previous jobs, I was responsible for, among other things, determining the thickness of the wire for automobile electrical systems. One of the basic issues with determining wire thickness is considering the temperature of the wire in the vehicle. A thick wire will stay cooler than a thin wire when you put electrical current through it, so we control the temperature (and avoid vehicle fires) through the careful selection of the wire thicknesses. I once spent an afternoon with a mechanical engineering professor at the University of Michigan who was studying the temperature effects of electricity through a bundle of wires, like the wire bundles found in the dash panel of a car. After working on it for a year or so he found that he could predict the temperature if 1 or 2 or

3 wires were heating up due to electrical current. Once he got past 3 wires, the calculations became far too complex. The wires might run side-by-side for a while, and then twist, then have an area where air could flow over them, etc. There were just too many variables. To make matters worse, the professor had created situations in the lab that we had never seen in the real world. Of course, as an engineer, I couldn't indulge in this kind of theoretical noodling. I had a real-life problem to solve. The professor's calculations were only useful if we limited our wire bundles to 3 wires or less, but if people wanted radio, air conditioning, anti-lock brakes, etc., we needed to fit 250 wires in a bundle in the dash panel. We had to get the next model year out. So, we did what we always did. To design the wiring in the car, we just had to make some assumptions on how many wires might be heating up at once, then make some assumptions about the ability of the rest of the wires in the bundle to dissipate that heat.

I looked at the question of Jesus and His divinity in the same way. I decided that John Dominic Crossan's approach was too much like the mechanical engineering professor. He had decided to limit his assumptions to the point where his theories became too academic. It's almost as if Crossan forgot that we are talking about an omniscient, all-powerful God that transcends time and space. As I considered Crossan's arguments, I realized that this was his "leap of faith". He assumed that science could address God's ability to become man. Obviously, if science was outgunned by 4 wires getting warm together, science was in no position to address the question of God's capabilities. I decided to accept Dr Brown's assumption regarding the resurrection of Jesus, and left open the possibility of accepting more assumptions, if needed.

Now I was back where I started. I only knew my work had shown me that I couldn't rely on science to perfectly reveal the truths within the physical world, so I certainly couldn't rely on it to show me eternal Truth. I limited my assumptions to three. First, I decided to assume that God exists. This was the most obvious assumption. Sure, I could have assumed that God did not exist, but that would have permanently left me with no understanding of the eternal Truth, because without God, there is no eternal Truth. No eternal Truth means that the universe is random. My experience with science and nature had showed me that the universe to be more rational and ordered than that. Second, I assumed that God is all-powerful and is capable of doing anything He wants. Certainly, if God was capable of creating the universe, He was capable of creating miracles..

Finally, if I was to seriously consider Christianity, St Paul teaches (and Dr Brown seemed to agree) that the core of the Christian faith is the resurrection, so I was willing to question almost anything, but I decided that the resurrection was off limits.

Of course, none of this was based on faith. Luther says, "Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake his life on it a thousand times." My beliefs in my three assumptions was no where near this level. I had just bought into an ideology that I would gladly give up if something better ever came along. For me at this time, being a Christian was like being a capitalist or being an member of the Society of Automotive Engineers. It was a group with a common set of ideas and principles brought together to promote those principles in the greater society. I still wasn't sure where I stood with the rest

of the teachings of Dr Brown. He questioned the virgin birth, and many other traditional doctrines. I had been misled once by Dr Crossan and I didn't want to jump on anybody's band wagon too quickly again.

At this point, family life started seriously getting in the way of my theological journey. My kids started getting older and all of my spare time was taken with coaching their extracurricular academic teams, along with coaching T-ball, baseball and softball in the summer. I had decided to believe in God and His power and the resurrection, but they were all academic beliefs. They didn't translate into anything meaningful in my life.

At about this time, I had gotten a new job as an engineering manager, responsible for a half dozen engineers. My boss was very supportive of everything I did, but his manager, the director of the group, felt that I wasn't "tough enough" on my team. Every day for two years, I was subjected to his ridicule and bullying. The director's perspective was that he would make life very rough on me until I decided to pass the beatings down to the engineers who worked for me. I felt strongly that this wasn't the best way to get performance out of professionals, so I tried to continually improve our metrics through other methods.

Although, I was always able to show results, he always felt that our results would be better with his methods. We were at a impasse.

One Sunday evening during this time, our family went to church. The pastor gave a short sermon challenging us to ask God for something that we didn't think possible. Typically, I would have written off this kind of sermon as silly, at best, and dangerous, at worst. How many people had died waiting for God's healing? How many had rejected God because He chose to not answer their prayer? Doesn't He have the right to say no? But, on this Sunday, I was open to the pastor's words. I was at the end of my rope at work and didn't know what else to do, so I asked that God would do something about my director at work.

The next day, I got in early, as I always did, and the location director also got in early, as he always did. And, as we always did, we had our coffee together. We would typically talk about our kids and their sports. It was sort of a time of daily detente so we were both always clear that our disagreements were "only business". On this particular morning, my director said something that almost put me on the floor. "I've been thinking," he said, "maybe you're right. Maybe you don't need to be rougher on your guys to get the best performance."

I was shocked. On so many levels, I was shocked. I was shocked that he would change. I was shocked that he would openly tell me that he was going to change. Then, I was shocked when he followed through and actually was more supportive of my management style. Mostly, I was shocked that God had answered my prayer.

Now, I know that most folks wouldn't consider something so small to be a miracle, but I did. Years of struggle unexpectedly came to an end in an instant within hours of my prayer. For the first time in my life, my belief in God was more than academic. Previous to this moment, I was,

at least on a practical level, a deist. Although I professed a personal God who saved us through Jesus Christ every week at church, I didn't really believe it. I only hoped it was true. I hoped with everything I had, but it was still just hope, not belief.

Part 3

I started to take my family to church more often. As the kids got a little older and I wasn't coaching their baseball and softball teams anymore, I found I had time to also resume my consideration of the rules of my faith. How far was I willing to go with my assumptions? I was willing to accept that Jesus rose from the dead, but what are the logical implications of that statement and what are its limits?

I figured that it would be best to take another shot at understanding the Bible. The problem was that there were all kinds of truth in the Bible. Physical truth, metaphorical truth, poetry and history are all wound up together and it's not always clear which are which. How could I tell the difference so I could consider the Biblical claims? As has always been the case, the road to my answer was a lot more circuitous than I expected.

It was at this time that our church decided to participate in Rick Warren's Purpose Driven Life series. Every week, we heard about how important it was that we participate in this initiative. Finally, on the last day to sign up, I went to the sign-up board, found a list of names with an opening and penciled Maria's and my name down in one of the groups.

Maria wasn't with me when I signed up. When we got home, she was firmly set against participating. She gave three reasons for her reticence. First of all, the theology wasn't Lutheran. Second of all, it wasn't Lutheran. She also gave a third reason. What was it...? Oh yeah! It wasn't Lutheran. I thought it was important to connect with the people in the church, so I convinced her to go along with it. She agreed as long as she could study something else. Still, she was suspicious enough of The Purpose Driven Life, to see what the ELCA website had to say about Rick Warren.

As she was looking, she stumbled upon something about the ELCA considering changes that would allow gays and lesbians to marry and to serve as pastors. We were both surprised and (believe it or not!) even encouraged by this discussion. Back in the 80's I had begun scaring Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses off my front porch by asking them the "gay question", a very effective method to shut down unwanted religious discussion. I didn't only ask the questions about gays to scare off these religious folks, though. I was genuinely wondering about the Christian view on homosexuality. I was glad that we would finally have a serious discussion on the subject between thoughtful, intelligent people. I was also glad because I had always had gay and lesbian friends. Even though I had never read the exact parts of the Bible that spoke out about homosexuality, I knew that the Bible was clearly against it. I was confident that the ELCA would come up with a theologically sound, compassionate and

generous position on this subject. I was very interested to see how they would manage it as opposed to the more “fundamentalist” facets of the Christian church.

I started to log in to a Yahoo group dedicated to the subject to hear what both sides had to say. At the same time, I bought a copy of Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings edited by Timothy Lull, The Book of Concord, Luther's Large Catechism and Luther's Commentary on Romans. I figured that everybody can have an opinion, but I needed something to evaluate these opinions. Having been misled by Crossan, I figured the only theologian I could trust was Luther himself, so I poured through his writings. I was especially interested in Luther's teachings on the law. How do we determine what is a sin? If homosexuality was a sin, how did Luther say we should handle it?

As I dug through Luther's writings, I couldn't find anywhere where he clearly stated how we determine that such and such was a sin. That's just not how he approached things. Every aspect of his writing seemed to be a defense of the doctrine of justification. He seemed to begin with the question of “How can I be saved?”, then he built everything out from there.

He didn't just limit himself to the immediate question of justification, though. He seemed to be trying to chase down every tentacle of every lie that could lead somebody away from a proper understanding of how we are saved. When Luther did write about the law, he spent a lot of time talking about the two ways to properly use the law. Luther said the first use of the law is to offer some guidance for society to prepare for the coming of Christ. Put another way, without God's law as a guide, might makes right, and there is no chance for a properly ordered society. The second use of the law was to demonstrate to us that we are sinful, and to strike terror in our hearts, which is the proper frame of mind for our introduction to Christ. Although I had heard from Lutheran pastors that “we are all sinners in need of Christ” and that “we have a sinful nature that we're never free from”. I had never heard that I should be terrified by the law. Luther's approach to the entire subject of the law was different than anything I had read before. In this light, I realized that the fundamental question, is in itself, sinful.

Homosexuality is one of the areas where the Bible is unusually consistent. Every time it's discussed, it's discussed as something that is wrong. To ask, “Is homosexuality a sin”, shows our desire to stand over and against the Biblical witness. Asking the question undermines the purpose of the law which is to break us down and to strike terror in our hearts. Instead, these kinds of questions distract us with self justification and we are never properly prepared for Christ.

As I considered what Luther was saying, I realized that I had never truly taken God's law seriously. Suddenly, my considerations turned from the homosexuals to myself. Had I ever approached the law from Luther's perspective? Had I ever allowed the law to demonstrate my sinfulness? Was I doing the same thing, questioning whether this or that was a sin? How do I look before the law of God? How do I measure up?

That evening, I went to bed early and for the first time, I really took ownership for all my sins. It was scary from the start, like standing naked before the eternal, omnipotent God. Suddenly, I saw my sins piled high before me. They went on and on, millions of them, like a black tower reaching up to the sky, each sin made of something like tar paper. Now, it was worse than scary. Just as Luther said, I was terrified. There was no way out. I was deeply caught in sin and it was obvious that I had no right to stand before the Goodness and Holiness of God.

In my profession, we are regularly faced with difficult problems, so we're trained to take them on, one step at a time. Even before I realized the magnitude of the problem before me, my professional training kicked in. So, I went to the tower with the intent of taking on each sin, one at a time. I took the smallest sin I could find and asked Christ, "Will you forgive me of this?"

Suddenly, it was like somebody had turned on a fire hose of forgiveness. I was swept away in an ocean of Christ's love. All of my sins were gone! All my burdens were lifted! I was free to no longer worry and fight for myself. I had been given everything I needed and everything I would ever need. All of the sudden, I wanted to go out into the streets and tell everybody I met, it's okay! Don't be afraid of your sins! Don't try to hide them and make excuses for them! Christ is stronger than your sins, but you have to stop pretending that they don't exist! Christ certainly did conquer death but He did something even more amazing. He conquered sin. My sin. He conquered my sin.

Over the next few weeks, I jumped into the on-line discussions about homosexuality to tell everybody about Jesus Christ and His power over sin. I thanked the gay community over and over for bringing this discussion up, because it opened my eyes to the power of my Lord. Then I asked them to stop pretending that homosexuality isn't a sin; stop parsing and playing with the text, it only confuses people. But, more importantly, I worried that their theoretical ramblings were keeping them from the love and power of Jesus Christ.

I continue to work through and understand the rules of my faith, but there are several things that are clear to me now. For example, I know that the entire Bible is about Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection. When Moses raised up a brass snake on a pole to heal the Israelites who were being killed by snakes in the desert, he was pointing us to that moment when Christ on the cross would become sin – that which is killing us – and telling us to see our sin clearly so we can be healed. When David slew Goliath, he was pointing us to the moment when Jesus would overcome sin and death. When the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, he was pointing us to when Christ would go before His Father to plead for our forgiveness.

I also know that the creeds and the confessions are accurate summaries of the Biblical witness. I know that these documents teach us to approach the Bible so that our justification is not confused by the tentacles of lies in religion. These are my assumptions and my boundaries. It was these assumptions, along with the teachings of Dr Martin Luther, that cleared the theological underbrush that had bogged me down in my faith journey for so long.

There is another thing that's clear to me now. Honesty is absolutely critical to experiencing love. When my kids were young, I often told them that I could handle almost anything they did, except lying. When we lie, we create a fake person that we pretend to be. I told them, when you lie to me, you take away my ability to know you for who you really are. While I continue to love you, this pretending creates a wall between us and destroys your ability to experience my love since you know that the person I believe you to be isn't the real you.

When I was making excuses or hiding my sins from God, I was doing the same thing. I was creating a fake person that I thought would be more acceptable to Him, but my lies only made me wonder about God's love for me. How foolish I was. He didn't ask that I be perfect, or even right. I only needed to be honest enough to stand naked in my sin before Him. Once I finally did this, He took my sin and placed it on His beloved Son, so I could stand before the Father clothed in Christ's righteousness, so I could begin to know of all that He has made available to me through His love and grace, so I could tell the world with confidence of the great love and grace awaiting them, if they will only be honest before Him.

1 John 1:8-10

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

Amen.