

Chapter 21(Messy gospel)

You will never be free until you free yourself from the prison of your own false thoughts-

Phillip Arnold

It's just that simple: I want the truth. I want to believe in God and in the church. If I were new to Christianity, what should I call truth? Just pick up a track on the street? Which track is the right one? In Vegas the ground was littered with everything imaginable. My son told me to take pictures of the pond scum. Pond scum in the desert? Yet, there it was bubbling out of a gutter on the main strip. What really caught my attention were the tracks. Religious? Well, that depends on what you worship. Strewn all over the sidewalk and mixed in the pond scum were porn and religious tracks. I was stunned by the amount of litter on the main strip in Vegas. Where was the pristine? Where was the professionalism? Instead, we were offered salvation in heaven and in bed.

What was a Christian guy doing in pond scum? To be fair it was part of our trip. We had used Vegas as a pit stop on a Grand Canyon tour. We actually went to a movie as our highlight. Yet, the message was overwhelming. Up and down the streets drove the girls, girls, girls' ads. Almost on every street pole were pictures and advertisements for a good time. There were actually nude girls trading cards. Pond scum was the least of my worries.

Then there was the Christian side. A man stood in front of the Belagio asking people to repent and choose Jesus. He was a Mino in the sea of sin. I'm sure his wife was looking for him trying to find Nemo. This well-meaning man was distributing the religious tracks asking you to come meet Jesus. However, his tracks were strewn in the mist pond scum and porn. I even saw one family strolling hand in hand while the children kicked the porn trading cards all over the place. It's nuts to even believe that I witnessed that mess. Yet, the fountains in front of the Belagio were stunning.

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Who is the blame for the mess in Vegas? Is it Vegas fault? Is it the churches' fault? You see I don't see it that way. The world is the world. My goodness, Vegas is the devil's playground. It is what it is. At the beginning of creation, we had good and evil battling. Now they are having it out in pond scum. I don't belittle the church for trying. I don't belittle the devil for trying. It's his town. Yet, this spiritual war has meaning in this life. I have sat on both sides of the fence. I would cheer the man on the street trying to save souls. In my past, I could see me mocking that same man for his ridicules drivels.

I think what concerns me the most is the water show. I will never forget listening to Elvis singing *Viva Las Vegas* in the mist of that great water works display. Vegas really knows how to distract you. To the family on the street kicking porn: did you notice? Notice what? Who notices the man calling for salvation? Who notices the girls lying on their backs nightly? Who notices the alcohol, sex, and addictions? However, we do notice bright lights and cool water works.

If God created our soul, then why does that soul not notice spiritual warfare more than Viva Las Vegas? Why does a soul not notice God? We see creation. We have all heard someone plead with us to come to Jesus. If you have ever channel surfed, you have passed a religious show. What catches your eye? What perks your ear? I do believe that the demonic was there in Vegas. Was God there too?

They say that God is everywhere. I do think that God has walked into the devil's playground from time to time. God strode into Sodom. He strode into Nineveh. Yet, in both cases I believe he left too. Jesus (according to Peter) visited hades to talk to the spirits in prison. God has visited us in one form or another. Did God put a preaching man in an impossible place to spread the gospel in Vegas?

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I feel that God does most of the work. He is found walking towards Sodom. He is waiting in a burning bush. Where is he calling us from today? I believe he is calling us within a man in Vegas. Sometimes churches wait for the people to come inside. They are like a burning bush without the fire. Come to me they say. I have heard men say that they trust God to draw people in. I just have a feeling we should be engaging people more outside the church just like the man in Vegas. Adam heard God walking in the garden. Who hears the church walking on the earth?

Are we chaining God to a church? There is probably very little holiness found in Vegas. I also believe that there is (at times) little holiness found in a church playing church. Let Paul's words to Timothy sink in. 2 Timothy 2: 9 *"for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained."* I can just imagine how crazy Paul went being chained in Rome. He's an evangelist! I also believe that the word cannot be chained to a building or a book. It must get out and roam. How crazy must God feel chained inside a church. He is an evangelist too.

It seems to me that standing on a street full of people looking at anything but your preaching is a waste of time. Why preach in the devil's playground to people who have never cared for God before? I have heard pastors argue that Lot preached to Sodom. The Bible never says so. The Bible does however say that Lot loved eye candy. He desired the more attractive land. Did that include Sodom and Gomorrah? Clearly it got out of hand. It's curious that the men who destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah came to Abraham first. What if God required Abraham to "desire" to have Lot saved? Who really saved Lot and his family? Is the man on the corner of the Belagio required to save people in Vegas?

I believe there is a line between trying to save people and what God does to save people. My heart is twisted in this mess. We create tracks and people throw them into pond scum. From the

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stories I have heard, very few people are led to the Lord through religious tracks. How many people have been led to the Lord by getting in too deep with gambling or sex? Yet, mixed within all this is God. He seems to find people within their mess. The other day I heard a hockey analyst talk about mistakes that lead to a goal. He says the most important mistake is made in the offensive zone. All the other mistakes only happen because of the first. Conversely, God creates opportunity through trials and tracks. The church sees the results of Gods work. Church does not have a real hand in what God is doing outside the church, that is reality. The tracks and the man on the street are the offensive zone. The church might be the goal. What if church began in the offensive zone? The messy places?

I have often wondered if God is still walking this earth. Passing through the streets and alleys looking for someone to draw to himself. I suppose a man is called to preach in Vegas by the Spirit of God. What a tough calling. I wish we could see what is really going on. Instead, we have so many views on how to save people. Make tracks. Print bulletins. Ask your congregation to invite a friend. Rely on God. Church leadership seems to expect everyone else to do its job. Is it any different expecting God to heal us rather than going to the doctor? Shoe leather does play a part in saving a soul. We need to go to the doctor. The church needs to go to the sick or lost.

My big hang-up is this. We take hours to make a religious track. Churches spend Gods funds to buy the prints. Hours and hours are used to discuss how to draw people in to a church. Yet, how is the church dealing with the homeless, prostitutes, and gamblers in Vegas? They send out offers through paper and people, but do they intentionally try and touch lives before they hit Vegas?

I feel that we have three types of people in Vegas. The first is looking to save souls. These people are not looking at the fountains. They are concerned with the lost. I suspect they are few

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and far between. The second group can't see the religious man because they are too busy watching advertising for waterfalls and girls for a good time. They are definitely interested in lost souls. The third group bugs me. It's the people on the street. The Lost souls. These people have an agenda. What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. Lets' have fun. What's the big deal if it's the devil's playground? Why are you there? Would you see a burning bush or a waterfall first?

I don't want to just harp on Vegas but it's ground zero. The devil distracts. Trust me, bright lights and opportunities to gamble and get laid distracts. I'm guessing the disciples would have left Vegas early on. Who is really listening to the man on the corner? Yet, swirling around this whole scene is people caught up in distraction. Does the church see them, or do they hear about them? What investment has the church made into making cities a better place to live? Where does church ministry money really go in a city? I'm betting (nice pun) that the church thinks the offensive zone is the church.

I just know one thing. The Jehovah witnesses that cruise my streets don't see me when I am delivering mail. They smile as they head to the next door. I know they see the next door but I'm positive they don't see me. The men advertising sex in Vegas do not see the girls or the religious man. It's all about the next sale. The people that come to Vegas see waterfalls. They attend shows and blackjack tables. I know Christian people that go there often. Do they see God there? Do they see the girls lying on their backs? How do they feel about the religious man?

All I know is that a small spiritual war is happening in places like Vegas. I am just wondering if the right message is being given by the church in regards to the devil's playground? Who preaches against people going to Hawaii or Disneyland? Who gives out coupons to avoid Burger King or McDonalds? So, a man is handing out tracks to those who willfully want to play

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in Vegas. These people don't want to play in heaven. Isn't the gospel as important in Los Angeles or St Petersburg? I just feel we tend to focus on the current place that sin gathers. Yet, why aren't we focusing on where sin begins?

I have always believed that the absence of God is the best track. Let hell have its way for a while. There is great value in planting seeds. How many religious shows, signs, and verses will it take to catch your eye? Instead, I want to believe that God uses his own plan to catch eyes. To perk ears. I don't want to pick on the man who preaches on the street. He was called. I don't want to pick on the preacher in the church, he was called. I believe that God will allow a soul to be infected with two types of spiritual: evil and good. I believe that either one can put you to sleep or wake you up.

How to save a soul? Just make a track and bingo your saved. Well, no. I think the struggle is in the message. What message sells on a street in Vegas? I get it that sex sells. I also get it that the Spirit sells. However, I think that is the key. People talk about receiving the Spirit. They mention a conversion event. Not everyone, but many have. A track or gospel message will draw in someone to the Lord. A drunken stupor will move a person to search out God. I for one will come back to the term "God draws", and for whatever reason God draws in his own way.

Speaking of "God draws" does he draw people to himself more or less than you thought? I suppose it's in how you view the world. I, and many others, were amazed that I became a Christian. My prior life was a train wreck. God and I were not best friends. I mocked Christians. Yet, God finds a way to move people to himself. It could be as simple as a cross on a steeple. The person on the TV. The radio gospel hour. God will use whatever he chooses. I say the Spirit is moving everywhere.

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It's one of the reasons I dislike churches wasting time trying to draw people in. How could thinking about the lost be a waste of time? I just feel that loving and understanding people outweighs programs. There is a place for the "hour of decision" by Billy Graham. There is a place for an alter call. Yet, God uses the most unorthodox crazy ways to draw people into Jesus. Why on earth would an unsaved, unchurched man decide to cry out to God in his truck while driving to work? God only knows! I'm just not convinced there is a program or plan. Most conversions are miraculous.

What is the power of the gospel? There is nothing that beats love and attention. If I phoned someone right now and told them I loved them and missed them, how would they feel? Is it more powerful than sending them a text? I bet it has a greater impact than waiting until the next time our paths cross. Is Vegas, a bar, or a rock concert anymore different than Sodom and Gomorrah? Yes, Nineveh was saved (for a time). God tried to impact their lives. Again, God sent someone in. I am convinced that the Spirit of God moved through Jonah.

To me that is the main point. God has always walked in. He was walking in the garden. He walked in Jesus shoes. God was even in a pillar that went ahead or behind the Israelite camp. God moves through, within, and around our lives. That's how he works. Just let it sink in. God was in the bush before Moses arrived. God was issuing a ram to be where Abraham was headed with Isaac. Jesus arrived at the place the woman at the well was going to. He saw Thomas before Thomas saw him. I believe with all my heart that we should be living our lives with the intent that God will work on people through us. We are to be the hands and feet of Jesus.

I am staring at a few tracks I had gathered over the years. As I glazed over them all I am in wonder. What is the best method of presenting the gospel? My Son and I traveled through Salt Lake City. I was amazed at how far civilization stretched in that area. Shop after shop passed us

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by for over 100 kms. I stopped to take pictures of the Mormon temple. I'm not Mormon but their temple is cool.

The temple area was very interesting. It's placed within a neighborhood on the edge of the downtown core. It has marvelous fountains and parks surrounding it. Two things caught my attention. This first was the homeless sprawled out in the parks. It just seemed weird to me that Mormon boys travel around North America on Spiritual treks trying to do good deeds. We have all seen them in their black suits. Yet, there is homeless next to their sacred temple. Maybe they didn't need to leave?

Secondly, I saw the event that unfolded before me on a Friday night. They must have been having a service or something. Believe it or not a huge underground garage door opened under the Temple and the police showed up. Men in black suits that looked like the FBI came out of nowhere and started directing traffic into the garage. The whole place literally went from silent to a buzz of noise. Yet, the homeless remained in their place just outside the temple area.

It's a messy gospel. We have our building and we have our programs. The tracks before me are inviting you and me to come check out a message. Is it a message of finding a home in a temple or being homeless in the park? One track before me has the words peace, health, and prosperity in bold. Underneath it says everyone's dream. Is that the gospel? Verses are quoted from Isaiah to bolster those words. Inside the little booklet are also words like family, free, and benefit. Is that the intention of Gods will? Another track is lite on the words. Instead, it seems mysterious by quoting a verse without explanation. Below is a comment about real life. Again, this track offers a free seminar.

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I have a Bible track that is slightly unusual. It's a dollar bill with Donald Trump on it. The words Billion are everywhere. Trump and billion are the hook to read it. The backside then goes into a long discussion on heaven or hell. At the bottom is a link for repentorperish.org. This track is defiantly pushing buttons as Trump seems to. Is this the right way to win me for God?

I feel that tracks are like reversed fly paper. We'll just throw them and see what sticks. I got into an argument the other day with a colleague over Bible commentaries. They felt that we need them as reference. It was advised in university to avoid them. I for one agree with that sentiment. I was looking up a confusion I had over the term "sons of God." I went through six commentaries and they were all different. In the end I realized that they knew as much as I did. Let the Bible speak to you. Remember, commentaries are the work that the Bible did with someone else. To me commentaries are fly paper too. We just read them until something they wrote sticks to what we believe.

You see, the gospel is not a belief we have. Some believe we are all saved. Others content that only some are predestined. There are a ton of beliefs on what the gospel message really is. Yet, the Bible will tell you. Again, in university, a professor asked us to read a passage as many times as needed until our preconceived notions leave and the message appears. It's easy to find a verse to fit our beliefs. However, it's not that easy to fit what we believe into the whole Bible. So, we cut and paste verses all the time to make our own version of the gospel fit the Bible.

I have repeated this over and over. Let's go down that road again. The Christ promise has been given since the beginning of Genesis. That promise, hope, theme, and image is found within all the prophecies. We see bits and pieces of Jesus in Melchizedek to David. From Moses to Solomon. Noah and the Ark symbolize baptism. Moses enters the wilderness and Jesus comes out of the wilderness. The thread of Gods way of doing things is riddled throughout the Bible.

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So, with that said, you can practically read any portion of the Bible and find Christ-like verses. No commentary has caught them all. Read the book to see the gospel come alive. Don't look for your beliefs to come alive through someone else.

We have a messy gospel because we assume too much. The pastoral uses the studies by other men to find agreement. To bolster what they believe. In the meantime, we are not asking the Spirit within us to do anything. Instead, we are just borrowing the Spirits work with someone else. If you don't know that Bible reading is personal then you miss the point of God's word. It affected Moses personally. The Psalms are a reflection of David. Clearly Paul has been moved by Jesus and the word. It's ok to have tracks. Yet, what moves men to believe? An encounter with God.

In Vegas, on the street, there are signs that girls are being used for sex. There are hints that gambling addiction is real. Is it better to preach the difference between heaven and damnation or to be the hands and feet of Jesus after the fallout? Stopping sin is the churches pastime. A ridicules notion to me. Have the Ten Commandments stopped sin? Has Jesus appearance on earth stopped sin? What law or program stops sin? What if sinners were better served after the fact. The church spends a ton of time trying to prevent sin. All your doing is putting a finger in one crack of an exploding dam.

God is there when we fall. God is there when tragedy is finished. Sometimes we need to be tested, tried, and pushed. You know we do. Where should the church put it's time and effort? For so long we have put prosperity and joy gospels ahead of redemption. I have heard pastors plead for us to turn our lives around. Beware of the roaming devil. Yet, sin will always keep pastors employed. What pastor eradicated sin in his or her church by good preaching? None!

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I think we would be better served as grace nets. When people fall, we are there. When tragedy sets in, we are coming to the rescue. One of the most famous ministries in Cambodia is called just that: rescue. They rescue kids and some parents from a fallen world around them. We could warn them ahead of time. Who warned us all our lives? Yet, we are all the fallen. Wouldn't it be nice to have a rescue net or grace net?

I do believe that those who search us out are those who have fallen. They are looking for someone at a well. They want to find love under a cross. I'm sure many down trodden people want the food bank to serve love and food. I do feel that the Christian gospel message has become messy. We spend far too much time offering a way to avoid heartbreak. In this broken world that is just plainly dumb half the time. A fallen world is heartbroken. It needs saving.

Let's return to the man on the Vegas corner. He is warning people before they sin. Nobody is that concerned about their fate before they sin. What if that man offered hope to the fallen rather than the lost? One group in Montreal are called the Angels of mercy. They feed the homeless. Certainly, they are not going up and down the street warning people not to become homeless. Instead, they are there when the fallen need a hand.

What we can do is help pick up the pieces. Each one of us has had God paste our broken lives back together. Is it better to warn of hell or guide to heaven? One night in my dad's basement I met God. I'm not so sure I had met Jesus yet. What drew me? What if it was the few spiritual words from Dr. Laura? Was it the prayers from some Christian friends? Was it a sign at a baseball game seven years before? All I know is I was pushed towards love and not hell.

In my accreditation for the pastorate, they all asked me what was my defining moment when I knew I was saved? It's tough. It's probably listening to Dr. Laura. However, I have been moved

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by many sermons and songs since that night. How did I know I wanted to be a pastor? I was drawn, pushed, and loved. God loved me so much that I wanted to share that with others. It means something to me when a whole compound of underprivileged children wanted to come to church because I visited them. That is when I knew. When I saw the love of God affecting their eyes.

The gospel has become messy when we plan a program to draw people in. What really is our agenda? Is it attendance? Is it increased giving? We say it's not but I have to ask why there are only a handful of churches on the lower side of my main city? Why indeed? I know a rather large church that just boasted that it started a satellite campus. Where did they put it? It's in a very rich neighborhood. The rich need the gospel too but the poor need a church that has it's back.

I just feel there is something wrong. We stand up and say that we are all in with the gospel message. Yet, our actions tell a slightly different story. Why would a rich church send missionaries to poor (predominantly black) countries, yet they build a new church in a rich neighborhood? We all know the answer. A poor church can't raise money like a rich one can. Is it about spreading the gospel or parading the mission? Church needs to search its heart. Nothing is what it seems.

I have to tell you. The outsider notices. I have heard a ton of excuses about why people don't attend church. The main one is through what I call the fishbowl theory. It states that the fish do not really care what's outside. They see outside but know there is little he can do. So, the fish does fish things. The other side has the people looking in. They see the fish doing fish things. From time to time, they feed the fish. Yet, they expect the fish to be what it is. To do fish things inside the bowl.

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The theory then takes a turn. The fish believes it can only do what it has been given. It sees more outside the tank, but knows its boundary. The person outside observes the fish doing fish stuff. We will clean the tank. Buy some new ornaments to make the tank look cool. Yet, never the two shall meet. One is inside and the other is outside. I don't think the church member realizes they are fish in a transparent bowl. The outsiders are watching. They might be wondering why the fish are acting the way they are? The fish believes he or she is acting the right way. There we have it.

In the end the pastoral fish thinks it looks good feeding poor black children. The outside looks around and wonder why the church does not feed the poor here on this side of the bowl. Yet, the boundary remains. The outsider tells the church it is failing to be a real fish church. The church says it's doing exactly what it should as a real fish church. The boundary is the gospel. We feed the gospel inside but ignore the gospel outside. The outsider never goes in and the church never ventures out. The perfect fishbowl.

Imagine a lost soul looking for a church. Wikipedia claims there are 317 denominations around the world. That could be 317 (minimum) different opinions on God. So, McDonalds is clear about who they are but the church is as clear as mud. A friend and I went through divorce at the same time. I ended up going to the Alliance denomination while he attended a Mormon church. Two unchurched guys went their own way. To some degree both churches offered us new wives. Yet, the theology is quite different. Who is closer to God?

Which one of us received the real gospel message? Sure, I think it was me. Was it? I am amazed that both churches mildly offered to find us a wife. Was that the selling point? Honestly, I can't remember being offered Jesus. I bet I did. Mormons have a graduated program to grow you as a person. It's really smart. Does that include a confession of faith? He didn't stay with the

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Mormons. Why? Why did I stay? What was their hook or selling point? No, it was not a wife although I did meet one through ministry.

It seems that a religious organization is afraid of the message. To them, it's not the best way to see God. Instead, we will sugar coat it with words like joy and peace. We'll offer people fellowship and chances to meet the right person. Even in the tracts, where is God really mentioned? Instead, God is in the fine print. Repent and billions are highlighted. Passages are given to bolster a point. The messy Gospel just might be that we refuse to use what God has given us to promote him. To use a Spirit driven life outside the church walls. A life that meets fallen people where they are. In their time of need outside the fish bowl.

I love music. No, I mean I love music! It's totally sad that I cannot play an instrument. Possibly I could but with one deaf ear I'm kind of tone deaf. Yet, I can pick out good music like the wind. I know good music and writing when I hear it. I pegged Taylor Swift. I get Carrie Underwood. Pink Floyd is cool. I get music. J Vernon McGee thinks rock and roll is the devil's music. Does that stand for the likes of Hillsong United too? God will use many forms to bring the good news.

I do believe that the gospel and music mix well. However, there are a few quirks that make the message messy. First of all is getting rid of secular music. I totally struggle with this one. Try and tell a new believer to get rid of their music collection. It took a few months but I did. All 804 cd's from the secular world. It was a relief. There were several reasons. First of all, I had stopped listening to them. I don't even know why. One day I realized that there was a good head of dust on them. Secondly, I was told to check the heart of the musician. People that made secular music tend to not be Christians (so I was told). Finally, you don't want spiritually bad stuff to enter your heart. Pick good godly music.

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Of course, there is another side. I love my Christian music. Lucky for me Christian music changed the year I believed. For the most part prior to 1999, Christian music was lame musically. Trust me, from a secular point of view Amy Grant and the Gathers gospel hour would not cut it. Michael W Smith is ok but Supertramp is better. One of my new Christian friends had a whole bunch of Christian music those re-jigged secular songs. It was the music of Highway to hell done to different godly verses. They loved it. I hated it. From a new believer perspective, what kind of an idiot would think you can remake Highway to hell holy. I got rid of my secular cd's because I needed a clean break. I did not need the sound back in a different way.

I was lucky. The Newsboys and Hillsong United saved me. Toby mac saved me. Christianity had caught up to rock and roll. I'm betting J Vernon was rolling in his grave. Since that time, I have seen an evolution of worship music. The words and music are outstanding. I think it has revolutionized church.

The messy part is the theology. Sure, some Christians think modern music has no place in the church. I think Hillsong and Newsboys has done the church favors. Yet, theologically speaking it's dicey. Many pastors have preached joy and the promise of prosperity while compromising the blood of Christ. There is a great song called "Show me your glory" by Jesus Culture. It asks us to jump into Gods glory. It's cool to think you could. However, biblically that would be bad. We cannot stand with God without the blood of Christ. It's just wonky theology. We can't joyfully jump in where God resides. Duh, the inner chambers of the Lord are dangerous. However, that song rocks!

I have been captured by Christian music. I could also say that secular music has changed me. It's nice to worship God with an iPod outside of church. Does wonky theology really hurt my Christianity? I get their passion for the Lord. I have heard it said that not all hymns are

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theologically correct either. In the end, I am more and more convinced that the gospel is messy. It's supposed to be that way. It should help us dissect our lives by what we hear and what the Bible says.

What to believe? Jesus' death was messy. His ministry in the eyes of the religious was certainly messy. From the outside, Christians are nuts. They pray, worship, and give for seemingly no reason. Their God is conveniently invisible. If I'm in Vegas, do you really think I want to be saved? No, I want to win! Who is this Jesus they are talking about? Is he a teacher, God, or mythological? Who or what is the church? I had a lady my age who asked me that question. She is a white woman in North America and does not know what church is. Isn't North America Christian? Why didn't she know?

There are many paths to God apparently. Is it the same message? The gospel is messy directly because of the paths. Should drunkenness lead to holiness? Is abstaining from sex a precursor to finding God? Who is the real God? Is he Jewish, Muslim, or both? I hope you can see what I have been driving at this whole book. To the lost, the church is lost. It does not even have its own crap together. The church appears to be all over the map. Yet, on the outside of the fishbowl are fallen people. The lost who desperately need a loving God. Why are we so concerned with church programs and plug and play while people are waiting for us to come to their tragedy? Yes, the gospel is messy.