

# STATIC

GOOD NEWS OF THE GOSPEL  
separation from God  
BORN AGAIN  
repentance  
redemption  
ticket to heaven  
GOSPEL  
SAVED BY GRACE  
SALVATION  
sin  
SAVED BY GRACE  
KINGDOM OF GOD

Tune out the "Christian Noise"  
and experience the real message  
of Jesus

Ron  
MartoiA



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.  
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When I see what Ron Martoia is now doing, it makes me proud to be called one of his teachers. In fact, in this book, he has become my teacher. Ron takes biblical terms such as *salvation* and *kingdom*, dusts off the cobwebs of routine, and finds under them fresh expressions for a new day.

—**Scot McKnight,**

author of *The Jesus Creed* and professor at North Park University

Ron Martoia is a sparkling, creative, brilliant thinker and a crisp, extraordinary, engaging communicator. His new book, *Static*, will help you think in fresh ways about familiar words that are crucial to your faith. You'll never hear or read key words like *gospel*, *Christ*, *kingdom*, or *repentance* the same way again. As a result, you'll be able to communicate your faith more effectively with others—and your own faith will be deeply enriched. A beautiful book!

—**Brian McLaren,**

author/speaker/activist ([brianmclaren.net](http://brianmclaren.net))

**NEWSFLASH:** Ron Martoia's phenomenal retelling of the story of Jesus will change the way you think about . . . well, nearly everything in the Bible. *Static* will provide you not only with new insights into the mission of Jesus, but also with a fresh, new vocabulary to communicate this breaking news in a much more meaningful way than before. This fascinating book by one of the leading spiritual architects for our generation sets the pace for a relevant new way to articulate our faith in today's world. Read it, and you will see why.

—**Stephan Joubert,**

editor of eKerk ([echurch.co.za](http://echurch.co.za)) and extraordinary professor in New Testament Studies at the University of Pretoria, South Africa

Ron Martoia's unique ability to help us navigate the deep waters of cultural change is a great asset to today's church leaders. He gives us fresh perspective on our need to understand and translate the ancient language of the church to a generation who currently only hear us speaking gibberish. Ron gives us new tools to communicate Jesus' message with great clarity. *Static* will serve the church as a catalyst to help us think differently about many issues of our faith and liberate us from the prison of the status quo.

—**Ted Baird,**

pastor of Fellowship Church@Anthem

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## Acknowledgments

Like all books, I suppose, the genesis of this volume has a feel of serendipity. I met Ken Petersen, senior acquisitions director at Tyndale, while he and I were at a small meeting of cultural creatives outside Washington DC. I was facilitating a conversation about how the language we use creates a cultural container for understanding. My role was to help this group reflect on the religious language so often used in media and the arts, and how that often shuts down spiritual conversation instead of enhancing it. Ken grabbed me after the group conversation and said, “We need to talk more about this.” That talk wasn’t to happen for a couple more months.

A number of weeks later, at Catalyst, I was doing a workshop on a similar topic. I was in a large ballroom, doing the typical post-talk question-and-answer time with a group of people, when out of the corner of my eye, I saw Ken again. His statement was an echo of what he had said before: “We need to talk.” That “talk,” more than anything else, is responsible for *Static*’s birth into the world of print media. I have Ken to thank for taking the initiative, and Gabe Lyons, the founder of Relevate, to thank for hosting the Axiom Conversation that brought Ken and me together.

Influencers in a book like this are legion, but I want to honor my primary “Gospels and Teachings of Jesus” mentor, Scot McKnight, with whom I studied and helped as TA for a semester during my master’s program. Scot has had more influence on my love of and engagement with the Gospels and with the Jesus in those Gospels than any other person. Though I quote him and reference him at times, do not hold him responsible for any craziness you read in these pages. His

teaching, writings, and the subsequent lunch he invited me to share with him and N. T. Wright at an SBL conference some ten years ago have had a seminal impact and a profound shaping influence on me.

Several people have been idea clarifiers and sounding boards in the process of this project. Tom Morrissey, the outstanding Christian novelist, has been a part of a faith community with me for a number of years. His challenges to me to write dialogue and communicate in a way that feels quite foreign at times have been a good stretch. I hope I have become a better writer for it. Our times at Beaners, in front of the fireplace, were critical and formative for *Static*.

At a crucial junction in my ministry, I had the opportunity to meet, and then more deeply connect with, Chuck Smith Jr. His long-distance support and friendship, as well as his theological dialogue, were life giving—and even nurturing—at a time when these ideas were just starting to ripen. Chuck, I have learned from your humility and acumen; thank you for modeling that blend for me.

Ted Baird and the amazing staff at Fellowship Church@Anthem have played a significant role in the *Static* discussion. Our monthly one-day theological retreats were influential in helping me think out loud about these concepts and how they might translate into a local church context. Ted, you are a dear friend, and with deep gratitude I thank you for who you are and all you have done for me. Thanks, Peg, for letting him be such a close friend to me. You are the great woman behind the great man.

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appreciation. The groups of people all over the country that have given input into this volume are impossible to number, but to all of you—thanks.

This book wouldn't have made it to completion without the work of acquisitions director Jon Farrar and senior editor Dave Lindstedt at Tyndale House. Thanks, you guys, for pushing and taking push back. All our tussling has made this a better book and, I hope, me a better writer. Thanks.

This book represents a journey in progress. My guess is that it raises as many questions as it attempts to explore. But instead of creating a sort of aimless agnosticism so common in the world of rethinking theological ideas, I hope that this points the way toward fruitful possibilities—possibilities worthy of further exploration, and possibilities that help us all become better followers and communicators of the message of Jesus.

Ron Martoia

## Foreword

*“Read your Bible every day to know Christ better.”<sup>1</sup>*

Do you agree or disagree with the above statement? Millions of Christians agree that Bible reading is necessary for spiritual growth. But after reading a few chapters of Leviticus or some of the strange logic in Romans or a few of the comic book-like scenes from Revelation, we realize that it is not enough to just *read* the Bible; we have to do some work at interpreting what we read as well.

Without having the luxury of acquiring tools for biblical study—such as learning Hebrew and Greek, being familiar with the geography of Bible lands, or exploring the culture of the ancient Mediterranean world—many Christians give up and trust their preachers to study the Bible for them. However, not all Bible teachers are created equal, and once we get a wrong idea lodged in our heads, discerning the real meaning of Scripture becomes more difficult.

In the following pages, you will recognize errors that are commonly assumed to be accurate reflections of what the Bible teaches. You will also see how the religious vocabulary of evangelical Christians tends to create confusion about what the Scriptures actually teach.

Why is it so difficult to properly interpret the Bible? What has happened to the message since the time that the scribe’s pen was first put to paper (or papyrus) that makes it so easy to read our own ideas *into the text* rather than extract the text’s inherent meaning? Ron explains that the central problem is “static.” Regardless of the quality of the transmission of God’s truth, the many significant differences between yester-

day and today, the culture of the Middle East and our contemporary Western world, and the original languages of Scripture and English (including usage and idioms), the interference is great enough to distort our reception of its meaning.

Ron Martoia has done a great service for everyone who loves the Bible and wants to see its truth in the hands and hearts of people who have never heard it in their own language, even though their language is English. He explores the cultural static—both historical and contemporary—that makes the message of the Bible more difficult to hear the further we get from the time of its composition. He also explains how static is increased when we read the Bible as if it were written by an author living today and writing specifically for our times.

Ron's book is a gift for believers who are discontent with superficial interpretations of Scripture, cliché evangelism, and a bad news version of the gospel. Guiding us back through original language in its original setting, Ron brings us to a gospel that is a divine newsflash, as compelling today as it was in the first century. He suggests a revision of our evangelistic lexicon so that the invitation and truth of God become more accessible to people in our own time, both inside and outside the church. Finally, Ron shows us how looking through a clearer lens will enable us to receive the biblical message as it was intended. As a result, when opening the Bible, we encounter a livelier text, a more profound revelation, and a compelling meaning that applies God's Word to our deepest needs, desires, and aspirations.

Chuck Smith Jr.

January 2007

# 1

## Pheidippides Was a Wimp

Jackson County, Michigan, where I live, is not for the faint of heart. Not if you're a runner, that is.

It's not that the hills are exceedingly steep, or excessively long. They're just everywhere. It seems you're always on a grade, either huffing toward a rise or coasting gingerly down the other side, planting your feet carefully because it's a whole lot easier to mess up a knee or an ankle running downhill than it is when you're climbing.

It was on a rare stretch of sun-dappled flatland that my friend Jess said to her husband, Phil, "You need to tell him. Tell Ron."

Hearing my name, I glanced back.

Conversation during our early morning training runs was not uncommon. And really, they weren't *our* training runs. They were Jess's. She was in her first year of marathoning and still trying to get a handle on the whole issue of *pace*. Distance running is all about pace—run too fast and you'll burn out early; run too slow and you will quite literally be an also-ran. So Phil and I, who have been running for years, were there for the same reason there is a mechanical bunny at a greyhound track. We were pacesetters.

An important key to pacesetting—one that just about every endurance athlete knows—is that the ideal

pace is generally the most rapid one at which you can still comfortably carry on a conversation. So talking is good.

And that's why I fell back into stride with my two friends and asked, "Tell me what?"

Phil shrugged. At least I think he shrugged. Either that or he'd just stepped funny on a seam in the blacktop.

"It's that guy at work I told you about. Marty."

"The one you brought to Westwinds a couple of weeks ago?"

"That's the one."

It was not unusual for our conversation to turn to church and spirituality. I had pastored a large church for nearly a decade and a half before taking on an international speaking and consulting ministry. I had even baptized Phil, for that matter.

"He seemed like a pretty nice guy," I said. "Pretty garrulous." I pulled in a breath, a deep one, through my nose. The roadway was starting to rise again, and *garrulous* was a bigger word than I wanted to use at our present speed. Did I mention that Jess had finished tenth in her last marathon? So we were going at a pretty good clip.

I caught my wind. "You work with Marty, right?"

"Uh-huh. He's in the office next to mine. We usually grab lunch together. But lately, he's been—well—ducking me. I've asked him to get together with me several times over the past few days, and he's always had something else going on."

I knew where this was going.

"You didn't shove him a gospel tract or something, did you?"

Phil snorted. "Of course not. But I did . . . well, I did *tell* him about the gospel."

Jess surged slightly ahead. Taking the hint, Phil and I picked up our pace a little. We rounded a turn and met with a slight headwind. I pulled ahead and let Jess and Phil fall in behind me. We'd be running in this direction all the way back to my place, and we would take turns pulling and drafting—either blocking the wind or running in the lee of the lead runner.

"So," I called back over my shoulder, "what did you tell him?"

"You know," Phil said, "that . . . um . . . that he was a sinner and Jesus died for his sins, and how . . . well, how he needed Jesus."

I glanced back again. “In other words, you told him he’s totally inadequate, and you’ve got the cure.”

“Now, come on . . .” Phil blustered. But after a long moment of silence, he conceded, “Well—yeah. I guess I did.”

“Then no wonder.”

“But Phil’s *got* to do that,” Jess pointed out, her voice steady. I envied her. Even without looking, I could tell that she was fresh, not even slightly winded. The woman has lungs. “We’re commanded to do that. It’s in the Bible.”

“It is?”

“Mark 16:15.”

She said it so quickly that she must have been primed for this conversation. I wondered why it had taken her 4.7 miles to bring it up.

“Jesus said to go into all the world and preach the good news to everyone, everywhere,” she concluded.

“Okay.” I nodded out of habit, even though all they could see was the back of my head. “And what’s the good news?”

“That’s a silly question, Ron. It’s in the next verse,” Jess said. “Anyone who believes and is baptized will be saved, but anyone who refuses to believe will be condemned. Jesus died for your sins. That’s the good news. Everybody knows that.”

“Everybody does,” I agreed. “But what if everybody’s wrong?”

I sensed a change in our running formation and glanced back over my shoulder.

I was running by myself.

I stopped and turned around. Fifty feet back, Phil was bent over with his hands on both knees, huffing, and Jess was just sort of standing there, glaring at me.

“It’s cool,” I assured them. “I haven’t turned atheist. I haven’t even turned universalist. And I can explain. But first, come on, you two; we have another half mile. Let’s pick it up again before we cool down.”



There’s a secret to making a decent egg-white omelet. To start with, forget the milk. No, not even skim milk, or *organic*

skim milk. Milk in any form has no business—ever—in an omelet pan.

The temperature is vital, too. So is aeration. You have to whip the eggs like there’s no tomorrow, but not so much that you wind up with a pastry topping.

Jess and Phil have long since learned to leave me alone in the kitchen. So, before I fired up the stove, I walked into my study, pulled down a couple of different Bible versions, and gave one to each of them, saying, “Have a run through these while I get breakfast ready. You’re looking for two verses: one saying that the gospel—the *good news*—is that Christ died for your sins, and another one saying you’re supposed to buttonhole people and say, ‘Okay, there are these four spiritual laws . . .’”

I heard the two of them muttering as I sautéed some onions, mushrooms, and cilantro. There was a “here” from Jess and an “uh-huh” or two from Phil as I poured the beaten egg whites into a couple of omelet pans. By the time I set their plates before them, they both had a pencils-down, test-over look on their faces.

“Okay,” Jess said, tapping a page of the New Testament. “It says here that—”

“Hang on a sec,” I told her. “I need to get my omelet off the stove.”

I came back with my plate, set it down, sat myself down, and said, “Let’s pray.” As I offered thanks for the food, my two friends had a look of relief on their faces. I could almost read their thoughts: *Well, he’s still praying, so he can’t be that far gone.*

“Let’s eat this while it’s still hot,” I said. “Then we can tackle the deep theological questions, okay?”

We discussed the morning’s run while we finished our breakfast, but I hadn’t even set my fork all the way down before Jess said, “First Corinthians 15:3” (NLT).

“All right.” I nodded. “What does it say?”

“I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins.”

“And the end of that second sentence?”

“Huh?” Jess glanced down. “Oh, ‘. . . just as the Scriptures said.’”

“Which may be the most important part of the verse,” I said. I turned to Phil. “What did you find?”

Phil skewed his mouth to one side, the way he does when he’s thinking things over. “Well, I was looking here in the third chapter of John. You know, the part about Nicodemus? This is verse 3, in the NIV: ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.’ Seems to me that Jesus is witnessing there.”

“Is he?” I asked. “Or is he just answering a question—or was there even a question asked? I think the Nicodemus passage may be a discussion for another morning run; we need to talk about that passage sometime.”

Jess and Phil looked at each other.

“In the stories of Jesus’ life, the salvation parts—all of them—are answers to direct questions,” I said. “People ask Jesus or a disciple to tell them about salvation, and they get an honest answer. But if *salvation* is the ‘good news’ that we read about, then why do people have to drag it out of Jesus and the disciples? Or look at Acts 16:17, NLT. In that account, a girl is tagging along behind Paul and Silas, and she is shouting, ‘These men are servants of the Most High God, and they have come to tell you how to be saved.’ But Paul, instead of saying, ‘Uh-huh—sing it, sister; we got the power,’ turns around and commands an evil spirit to leave the girl. So, apparently, Paul recognizes that emphasizing salvation is a misdirection—not to mention an irritant. Which it is.”

“It is?” Jess and Phil responded in stereo.

I gathered the plates and took them to the sink. “We need to think of these verses in the context of the time when they were written. We need to think in the mind-set of the ancients.”

“They were wimps,” Jess said.



Okay, this requires an explanation. As most schoolkids and all marathoners know, in 490 BC, the fate of ancient Greece hung on the outcome of the Battle of Marathon because Marathon was the final obstacle between the invading Persians

and the city of Athens. Naturally, the Athenian rulers were on pins and needles, waiting to hear how the battle would turn out. And because this news was so crucial, a Greek warrior named Pheidippides was dispatched from the battlefield to bring the news of the Greek victory to Athens. He ran the roughly twenty-five miles from Marathon, gave his report, and then promptly died of exhaustion.

When Jess had run her first marathon, Phil and I were waiting for her as she crossed the finish line. She had been tired, but was by no means totally exhausted. After she'd caught her breath from the finishing sprint, she looked happily at Phil and me and declared, "Pheidippides was a wimp!"



When Jess made her remark about the ancients being wimps, I laughed and said, "Okay, agreed. All wimps. Every one of them. But wimps with their own cultural roots, which were very different from ours."

Setting the dishes in the sink, I walked back into my study, retrieved a book from my shelf, and came out reading the text:

The providence which has ordered the whole of our life, showing zeal and concern, has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving it to [him] . . . by filling him with virtue for doing the work of a benefactor among men, and by sending in him, as it were, a savior for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create peace everywhere. . . . The birthday of the god was the beginning for the world of the gospel that has come to men through him.<sup>1</sup>

I looked up. "That's a pretty good translation of a birth announcement that was written in *koine* Greek, the same form of basic, universal Greek used in the New Testament. Whose birth do you think it announces?"

o Jess gave me a look like, *What kind of softball question is that?* "The birth of Jesus, of course," she said.

“Wrong,” I said with a smile. “It’s the official birth announcement of Octavian—otherwise known as Caesar Augustus—written almost six decades before the birth of Christ.”

I showed them the page and they scoured it, looking for an error, a footnote, anything that might lessen the confusion. Finally, Phil looked up. “But it says *savior*.”

“Which, in ancient times, meant about the same thing as *victor*,” I said. “You probably know that when a king or a general in those days captured a city or defeated an enemy at war, it was his right to burn the city to the ground and kill everyone in it. A quick survey of the Old Testament shows that such things happened with absolutely numbing regularity. But as victor, he could also decide to spare the city and its inhabitants, which made him their *savior*. In other words, he kept them from a death they deserved.”

“Exactly,” said Jess. “Which was why people had to know about Jesus. They knew they needed to be saved from the consequences of their sins.”

“Did they?” I sat down at the table again. “Let’s think about this. Jesus conducted a roving ministry, walking around Palestine—a Jewish state occupied by a foreign power. The final destruction of the Temple had not yet taken place. In fact, Herod the Great—the same Herod who tried to hunt down Jesus when he was an infant, and the father of the Herod who was ruling when Jesus was crucified—had rebuilt the Temple as a means of pacifying the Jews to make them more accepting of their Roman rulers. So, if you had been in an argument with your neighbor, or you hadn’t met with your *minyán*, your synagogue leaders, for a few days, you could set things right by going into the Temple and making a donation or offering a sacrifice.”

I turned to Phil. “What would you say if I told you I had a great device to keep the elephants off your lawn. Would you be interested in one?”

“I’d say I don’t have a problem with elephants on my lawn.”

“That’s right. And a Jew in the first century would have given a similar reply to someone who said, ‘I’ve got the remedy for your sins.’ Jews of this period didn’t see themselves

as sinful. They were doing a pretty good job of living by the rules; and when they broke one, they could offer a sacrifice at the Temple. That's why Jesus and the disciples didn't lead with the salvation story, as in 'This is how you get to heaven.' They knew they wouldn't find any takers."

"But Jesus died for our sins!" Phil insisted.

"He did," I agreed. "But stay with me for a second." I looked at Phil and Jess and asked, "Is slavery wrong?"

They nodded.

"Would you agree that it's a sin?"

They nodded again.

"So the plantation owners of the antebellum American South—were they sinners?"

"Sure," Phil said.

"Then, in that case, every Union soldier who perished during the Civil War died for slave owners' sins. Does that make all those soldiers the same as Jesus?"

"Of course not!" Jess realized she had almost shouted her reply, and added, "Sorry."

"Jesus was not the only Jew to die on a tree in those days," I said. "Thousands did. It was the most common means of executing people who were seen as enemies of the Roman state—non-Romans, at least. So, although his death gained some notoriety, it didn't make him unique. And even though John 3:16 makes it clear that Jesus died to create a pathway to God, that isn't the good news we're talking about when we read the New Testament. In fact, I'm not even sure 'good news' works as a translation in this day and age. It's more of a 'breaking story' or 'headline news.'"

Jess and Phil looked at each other, and then at me.

"So," Jess asked after a moment of silence, "what *is* the headline news?"



Not many people ask Jess's question: "What is the headline news?" or even "What is the gospel?" In fact, I had never asked either question myself. I assumed I knew the answer.

I was part of the church. I was studying Scripture. I thought I knew it all. But when I talked to people outside the Christian bubble, people who didn't believe or who were searching for a deeper spirituality, I hit a brick wall every time. It was as if I had a weak cell-phone signal and static was chopping up my words. Does that sound familiar to you? That's what Jess and Phil were experiencing with Marty.

When you hit so many brick walls, eventually you've got to question whether you truly understand the message yourself—or whether you really know how to communicate it. When I found myself hitting brick walls, I started a search to understand what was going on. I read. I talked to people. I listened. This book contains the results of my search.

Maybe you're on the same journey I've been on. You know something isn't working, but you're not quite sure what. I invite you to see what I've learned. On the other hand, maybe you're on a much different journey than I am. Maybe you're burned out by church. Or maybe you've experienced a lot of *static* when you've talked about God or spirituality with other people. Maybe you're searching for something, but you're not sure what. I hope that some of the lessons I've learned on my journey will help you see more clearly what you're ultimately searching for in life.

# Notes

## Foreword

1. This word of advice appears on a list of recommendations for new Christians who want to *deepen* their life in Christ, in *Steps to Peace with God*, by Billy Graham (Minneapolis: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 1998). The text can also be found online: [http://www.billygraham.org/SH\\_StepsToPeace.asp](http://www.billygraham.org/SH_StepsToPeace.asp).

## Chapter 1 Pheidippides Was a Wimp

1. Frederick W. Dankes, *Jesus and the New Age: A Commentary on St. Luke's Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 54.

## Chapter 5 A First-Century Newsflash

1. William L. Lane, "The Gospel According to Mark," in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 42.
2. *Ibid.*, 43.

## Chapter 8 Reorienting the Compass

1. Two sources that provided background information for this section are N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 250–254; and Scot McKnight, *A New Vision for Israel: The Teachings of Jesus in National Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 172–175.

## Chapter 9 High Stakes and Juicy T-Bones

1. Peter Farb and George Armelagos, *Consuming Passions: The Anthropology of Eating* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 4, 211.

## Chapter 13 Four Views of the Kingdom

1. For further reading on the kingdom of God, see George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1974), especially chapter 3; Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire* (Fortress, 2003); and Richard A. Horsley, *The Message and the Kingdom* (Fortress, 2002).

## About the Author

Dr. Ron Martoia is a transformational architect. His mission is to help followers of Jesus design, build, and experience revolutionary change as they seek to understand and interact with the new culture in which they live. Over the past two years, Ron has spoken to more than 25,000 leaders, in a variety of conference settings, on the new and shifting intersection between church and culture. He helps churches consider how they can shift their theological outlook, which in turn will adjust their ministry trajectory and cultural interface. Through his speaking, consulting, writing, and acting as a “distant staff member” to a number of churches, Ron uses his cultural intonation to help churches shift paradigms from the old Newtonian world to the Quantum world of the twenty-first century.

He is the author of numerous articles and a chapter in *Great Preaching* titled “Preaching to Postmoderns.” His first book project, *Morph!*, a volume to help leaders do good self-leadership as they foster creative and compelling environments, was welcomed with widespread critical acclaim.

Ron facilitates a new experimental learning community model, called Vortex, in Jackson, Michigan. Meeting in an arts enclave, Vortex hosts weekly conversations on everything from string theory and the origins of the universe to the insights of Aristotle on personal development, as well as theological discussions about world religions and global spiritual formation models. Vortex hopes to be part of shaping a new learning container for twenty-first-century spiritual and personal formation.