

Finding Your Way Back to  
Jesus-Shaped Spirituality



**MERE CHURCHIANITY**

**The Internet Monk**  
**MICHAEL SPENCER**

[www.internetmonk.com](http://www.internetmonk.com)

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MERE CHURCHIANITY

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Names and details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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# Acknowledgments

Everything in this book has been written with a specific group of people in mind: friends and fellow Christians who have abandoned the church for various reasons. I cannot name them, nor would it be appropriate, but their journeys have animated my mind, heart, and keyboard on every page. I love them, and they remain my fellow pilgrims. I hope I have honored their integrity and continuing journey with Jesus.

In November 2000, I started a blog called the Internet Monk. Today a community of many thousands has made my writing part of their journey. Without these readers and encouragers from every Christian tradition, I would not be an author. To them, I owe this book.

My wife, Denise, is the answer to the question, I want to know what love is.

My children, Noel Cordle and Clay Spencer, never fail to make me glad that I am a father. I hope this book will honor their devotion to Christ and remind them of a dad's heart when I am gone.

My parents were humble, simple people who loved me. My father walked away from the church when I was small because of a divorce when he was a young man. He loved God from outside the church. He only heard me preach five times.

My mom loved the church, but her devotion to missional, servant living outside the church—working in a clothing ministry, assisting the homebound, always sharing her car and money with those needing help—has been an increasing revelation to me of where God's true servants are often to be found.

My in-laws, Cordell and Billie Day, have always been treasures for Denise and me as we have lived a life in ministry. Their constant support is a great gift.

This book was born when Jeff Dunn called me and said he'd read "Our Problem with Grace," a piece I posted on my blog. Jeff said I should write a book. No one has a better agent, and no one has a better friend in his agent. Thank you, Jeff, for making a dream come true.

My editor, Ron Lee, is a pro with a gentle touch and a firm sense of direction. I wouldn't want to edit my own writing, but Ron has made the experience a pleasure. Thank you, Ron, for all your hard work.

Thanks to the Boar's Head Tavern fellows, who have been a virtual Christian family for going on eight years now. They are peerless examples of rejoicing in the good that happens to others.

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Thanks to Paul Duke and Gerard Howell for showing me what ministry with humanity and integrity was all about.



## Publisher's Note

In the fall of 2009, Michael Spencer and I were working out the best structure for this book. He would send me a few chapters at a time, and I would read them as soon as they showed up in my Outlook inbox. I loved the directness of his writing, his humor and passion, and the boldness of his message.

We had made good progress on editing and sequencing the chapters when Michael said of his book, “I could lose my job over this.” He was only half joking. I could well imagine that some who supported the Christian school where Michael was campus minister might not appreciate his unvarnished views on the church. But he was not a writer—nor a shepherd—who would dilute his message to pacify potential critics.

Michael had written the entire book and completed his revisions before medical tests showed that he had cancer. The disease, and not opposition to his message, is the tragedy that interrupted his work at Oneida Baptist Institute. Cancer put a stop to his seventeen years of teaching and disrupted his years of pioneering pastoral ministry in the lives of hundreds of thousands who followed his blog ([www.internetmonk.com](http://www.internetmonk.com)).

I learned today that Michael, in his last months on earth, kept a journal. At the end of this book you can read one of the entries. It is characteristic of Michael's devotion to God—an unflinching affirmation and a benediction. But before you get to the Epilogue, allow your thinking to be challenged and your life changed by Michael's passionate message that Jesus is now and always the Alpha and Omega—not just in theory or doctrine, but in your life. Every day. “I am the Alpha and

the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment” (Revelation 21:6).

*Mere Churchianity* is the only book Michael wrote. These eighteen chapters contain the last words he approved for publication. If you don't already know the voice of the Internet Monk, you will discover that his words are wise, humorous, compassionate, challenging, and welcoming. It was my privilege to be Michael's editor. Now it is your privilege to read and discuss his words and to be blessed.

Ron R. Lee

Senior Editor, WaterBrook Press

April 2010

# The Dairy Queen Incident

This book began with an atheist in a Dairy Queen, thirty-three years ago.

I was a twenty-year-old college student and youth minister at a Baptist church in Kentucky. Most Sunday nights I took my rowdy and unspiritual youth group out for fast food as a reward for their endurance of church and Sunday school that day. A new Dairy Queen had just opened in our community, and I took the kids there for burgers or, if any of them preferred, soft ice cream.

We all loved DQ, so we stayed awhile. We bought our food, ate our food, and acted like a typical rowdy and unspiritual church youth group. The biggest stress of the evening for me, as the responsible adult, was some kid dumping an entire shaker of salt on a table. Having attended public schools and spent my share of time in school cafeterias, I thought nothing of it. I just left the mess for the help to clean up. We had paid for our food and, as far as I knew, departed the DQ without serious incident.

On Wednesday morning I received a letter from a girl who was working at the Dairy Queen the previous Sunday evening. I don't have that letter today, but I have never forgotten its basic message. Allow me to paraphrase:

Mr. Spencer,

You don't know me, but I am Jane Doe, and I work at the Dairy Queen on Hartford Road. I was working the front this past

Sunday night when your youth group invaded and abused our restaurant for an hour. You probably have no idea how rude they were and how much time and trouble their behavior and destruction of property caused our business because, like every other youth minister I see in our store, you are clueless about anyone who isn't in your group and blind to the behavior of your students.

You also probably don't know that I am a member of your church, but for the past year I have been an atheist. The reason is very simple: Christians like you have convinced me that God is a myth, an excuse used by religious people to mistreat others. As long as there are people like you and your youth group, I'll never come to church or believe in God again. You are petty, selfish, and arrogant. I would rather be an atheist, no matter what the consequences, than have people like you accept me just because I was a "Christian."

I know you won't contact me, and you'll probably throw this letter away and forget it, but just remember that when you and your youth group are being destructive and inconsiderate, there are people like me looking at you and making up our minds whether God even exists. If you are all I have to go on, he doesn't and never will.

Sincerely,  
Jane Doe

Reading this letter, many of you are probably reacting much as I did: here's some miserable, rejected girl with a chip on her shoulder, mad at her parents for making her go to church. She's probably mad about other things in her life too and needs someone to blame. So she takes it out on the youth group and on God. C'mon, it was just a little spilled salt. Really, how self-righteous does a person have to be to blame the representatives of God for her own rejection and pain?

If you were thinking something like that, you may be right. Or you could be dead wrong.

To show you where my head was at, I didn't go back to apologize. I wrote her off as a sad, isolated atheist with issues. I probably told some of the youth group members about her letter and had a big laugh at her hypersensitivity. At the time, I was fully capable of taking a letter like that and waving it around during a sermon, using it as an example of how miserable atheists are. I'm sure it crossed my mind that the presence of Christians in her workplace may have brought her "under conviction by the Holy Spirit" for her unbelief. Surely she had no legitimate reason to criticize my youth group.

Back then, I was a paid expert in churchianity. I knew how to impress the home crowd. I used all the right words, and I knew what buttons to push to rally the troops. Sadly, I knew very little about Jesus and the life he calls his followers to live.

Lots of Christians are like I was. They would find it easy to blame an atheist for not acting like a Christian, while failing to act like a Christian in the presence of an atheist. I did such things too many times to recall. I used the girl's honest, heartfelt critique as an easy pitch to hit in front of a clubby, misguided Christian audience. I bought into all the accepted assumptions: Christians are right, the other guys are wrong, and since we're in the right, we have nothing to worry about.



I held on to that safe place of smug comfort for many years, and then I realized it wasn't all that comfortable any longer. It has been more than thirty years since I read Jane Doe's letter, and I still can't get it out of my mind. Today I see her insights in a very different light. As a cocky, twenty-something preacher boy, I could easily write off a woman who didn't believe the truth. But now, in my fifties and bearing the scars of life, struggle, sin, and loss, I respect that young atheist more than I do a long list of high-profile Christian leaders.

Jane Doe is emblematic of something I now believe very deeply: unbelievers see some things about life, integrity, and consistency *much more clearly* than Christians do.

On that Sunday evening in Dairy Queen, my youth group probably was out of control. They were likely rude to the help, possibly foul-mouthed and insulting. They vandalized a saltshaker and made a mess for another person to clean up. I gave them a pass. I even thought it was funny. The prevailing tone of that evening was a selfish, unthinking party with all of us—adults and kids alike—caring a lot more about what we wanted than what another person might be thinking. And we didn't care who would have to clean up after us. Our understanding and practice of churchianity endorsed such behavior.

We had fun that night, but did we invite Jesus Christ to the party? I don't remember him being there. In fact, I don't think he mattered to us at all that evening. We were taking a break from the religious stuff.

The people working behind the counter? The guy who cleared the tables? The other customers? They might as well have not existed.

An atheist girl, having left the church behind and now looking back with eyes and ears sensitized to the Christian game, saw through our act with sobering clarity. She tried to do me a favor by telling me I had lost touch with Jesus. An atheist girl cared enough to tell me that my credibility as a Christian was zero, because there was nothing of Jesus about me and my students. All we had was distasteful pretense.

It took an atheist to tell me, perhaps for the first time, that I was not a Jesus-shaped person, no matter what I claimed to believe as a Christian. But I was so sure of what I believed, so convinced of the rightness of my religion, that I chose to ignore the truth she spoke.



When you read the title of this book, you might have thought it's a book for Christians, and that's fine, because I am a Christian. I have no doubt

that Christians want to hear what I have to say. However, this is not a Christian book in the time-honored tradition. I'm not going to tell Christians to be nicer, care more, help other people, be generous, try to forgive, do more for God, and so on, so that we can be better witnesses for Jesus.

I have good reasons for staying off the standard Christian-book path. It was churchianity—the “do more, be better, look good for God’s sake” variety—that turned me and my youth group into a room full of jerks. So if you’re a Christian, by all means read this book. You will find an approach to following Jesus that doesn’t ask you to do more while pretending to be righteous. I think you’ll like it.

But I’m not writing to church members who are happy where they’re at or to Christians who are heavily invested in the success and propagation of the church as an organization. I’m writing instead to those who may still be associated with the church but no longer buy into much of what the church says. Not because they doubt the reality of God, but because they doubt that the church is really representing Jesus.

I’m writing to people on the inside who are about to leave or have already left. I’m writing to those who are standing in the foyer of the church, ready to walk out, yet taking one last look around. They haven’t seen the reality of Jesus in a long time, but they can’t stop believing he is here. Somewhere. And they’re unsure what it will mean to strike out on their own.

*Mere Churchianity* is written for people who have come to the end of the road with the church but who can’t entirely walk away from Jesus. In the wreckage of a church-shaped religious faith, the reality of Jesus of Nazareth persists and calls out to them. I’m talking to those who have left, those who will leave, those who might as well leave, and those who don’t know why they are still hanging around.

And I’m writing to the outsiders who might be drawn to God if it weren’t for Christians.

---

Jesus-shaped spirituality has nothing to do with churchianity. Following Jesus does not require you to pledge allegiance to a religious institution. In fact, the track record of Christianity as an organization leads us to ask: What would it be like if Christianity were about Christ? What if all the pieces were in place and Jesus was the result? What if Christians were becoming more—not less—like Jesus? What would atheists see if Christianity were something Jesus himself would recognize?

That letter from the girl who worked at Dairy Queen contained an invisible paragraph. It would have been easy to see it, if I had bothered to look. The invisible paragraph says this:

You see, Mr. Spencer, even though I've left the church and the faith you are pushing, I still know a bit about Jesus. Christianity ought to be about Jesus, and with you, it's not. It's something else entirely. If Christians were at all about Jesus, if they were enough like him that even a visit to the Dairy Queen would be a place to serve Jesus and love people, then I might have some hope again that the church isn't full of liars. But Christians like you make me never want to hear about Christianity again.

When I was growing up in church, we were constantly being told how important it was that people “see Jesus in us.” We sang those words, and the preacher preached sermons using that theme. Being a “good witness” for Jesus was the constant bottom line.

Looking back at what formed me spiritually, I'm confronted with an incredible irony. While we talked about presenting Jesus to the world around us, unfortunately the following was true:

- We had almost no idea what Jesus was like. We did not study him. We did not ask questions. We were arrogant and certain.



- We assumed that being in church would make us like Jesus. Church programs and events filled our days, and everyone assumed that more church equaled more Jesus.
- We seldom studied anything in the Bible with the purpose of seeing how it connected to Jesus. The Bible was approached and taught as a collection of atomized verses, and no one ever linked its many parts to its one great theme: Jesus and his gospel.
- We often were ungracious and unloving to people who didn't believe what we did. Incredibly, we sometimes dished out mistreatment in the name of Jesus.
- We knew very little about what Jesus was doing on earth besides dying and rising again two thousand years ago. We were certain that being his followers meant that we didn't do the things sinners did. When anyone suggested we might be self-righteous, morally corrupt Pharisees, we were offended. After all, what did the critics know? They weren't Christians.
- We assumed that Jesus bought into our idea of what was important in life. All anyone had to do was read the Bible to see that we were in the right and everyone else was wrong.

From that, you can see why it was easy to go to a Dairy Queen on a Sunday night, act like an ungrateful gang of spoiled suburban brats, ignore the people who served us, leave a mess behind, and still feel we were authentic representatives of Jesus because we were “good church people.”

Here is the truth: Far from being Jesus-shaped Christians, we were church shaped. In fact, we were deniers of Jesus. We were frighteningly close to being Judas.

The girl working behind the counter pointed all this out to me more than three decades ago, but I wasn't listening. Today I'm paying attention, and this book is my repentance. It's a good time to get started.

Continuing the legacy of  
Michael Spencer

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Dispatches from the post evangelical wilderness