

# Enough of the Fluff

**Allow the fire of this current season to refine you and your message.**

When I met Sujo John, the man on *Charisma's* cover this month, I had already heard his amazing testimony of surviving 9/11. But when he shared his gripping story with me face to face in 2006, it was as if he still carried the smell of smoke from those burning skyscrapers. Until I heard about his

experience, the tragedy was just an event I had watched on TV. But when he told me about his narrow escape from the World Trade Center North Tower, and how he led victims to Jesus before they died, I realized how God's mercy was at work under all that melted steel and crushed concrete.

On that dark day, God plucked a young Indian immigrant out of the flames and commissioned him to be an evangelist. I believe Sujo's story carries a profound message for us all.

Sujo had been pursuing the American dream of wealth and success, but on 9/11 he made a major life adjustment. Everything changed when he heard the screams of dying people. Suddenly, in the light of eternity, his materialistic goals seemed pitifully shallow. Amid the coughing, the sirens, the unanswered cell phones and the mangled bodies, Sujo pledged to spend the rest of his life reaching people who don't know Christ.

We all need to make that decision.

I wish I could say that 9/11 woke up America. It is true that church attendance spiked for a few weeks after the tragedy. Now, eight years after the wake-up call sounded, we seem as arrogant and distracted as ever—in spite of the worst economic recession in decades.

The saddest part is that God's people did not learn the lesson of 9/11. Most of our churches today are still lukewarm and anemic. Our testimony is tarnished because of moral failures among our leaders. Our gospel is cheap.

We've abandoned the message of the cross and replaced it with the tasteless pablum of pep talks and motivational seminars. We focus on what is marketable to the masses and how we can cash in now on God's blessings while people perish around us.

The urgency of evangelism has become a foreign concept. Will it take another 9/11 to jolt us into reality?

More than 100 years ago British revivalist Charles Spurgeon sounded an alarm to an apathetic church in his country. He told them that the chief object of glorifying God was winning souls. His cry was fervent: "We must see souls born unto God. If we do not, our cry should be that of Rachel: 'Give me children, or I die.'"

I am sorry this is not the burden of the American church. We major on minors and preach to the choir, but we have all but forgotten our core message. We must reclaim it out of the fire like my friend Sujo did on 9/11. Perhaps we need to be reminded of the basics of the gospel:

**Human beings are sinners.** The depravity of man is not a popular doctrine in this selfish age. Tolerance has become the supreme virtue. But people have to be convinced they are filthy before they can see the need for a Savior to wash them clean.

**God is just, and He judges sin.** When was the last time you heard a sermon about eternal punishment? The soft-sell approach has become the norm. We dare not offend anybody, especially by mentioning that hell is a real place. So we rob the gospel of its power by removing the threat of punishment.

**God's love is revealed in Jesus.** It was the essence of love

for the Father to give His Son for us. We cannot fathom the depths of that love, but we must try to convey it to a love-starved world.

**Jesus provided full atonement.** Many people don't respond to our appeals for salvation because we don't fully explain what Jesus did on the cross. We have to make it clear! Salvation is available because Christ did all the work of redemption and said, "It is finished." We can't earn forgiveness, but by simply trusting in His finished work we can receive it freely.

The only hope for our country is a wave of mass conversions. Please ask God to break your heart for lost souls. Allow the fire of this current season to refine you and your message. Let's stop preaching fluff and reclaim the true gospel.

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Read J. LEE GRADY's weekly online column at [fireinmybones.com](http://fireinmybones.com). Or follow him on Twitter at leegrady.

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## **How A Brave Pakistani Taught Me to Stop Whining**

*Spending time last week with a persecuted Christian brother ruined me forever.*

I can't reveal my new Pakistani friend's name, even though he gave me permission to use it. I could never live with myself if he died because of something I wrote, but he wants the

world to know his amazing story. So I'll just call him Saleem.

I met this young church leader last weekend during a missions conference in a northeastern state. The same day we met, Islamic radicals were burning Christian houses to the ground in Gojra, an area not far from Saleem's city. So far, the body count in Gojra has been estimated to be as high as 20, and 19 others were injured when masked militants associated with the Taliban attacked a peaceful Christian settlement.

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# Marriage Is Not a Dictatorship

☒ *Confusion over the real meaning of "headship" often leads to marital conflict, but the Bible doesn't give husbands the right to be tyrants.*

As a Bible-believing Christian, Mike\* was the spiritual leader of his home. He believed that in order to be a faithful man of God he must always "be in charge." His wife, Jill\*, and their four children graciously submitted to his authority.

Mike insisted on controlling every aspect of home life. Jill was not allowed to handle any aspect of the family finances.

Jill felt God wouldn't be pleased if she didn't respect Mike's headship, so she eventually became numb to her husband's demands. Mike was never physically abusive, but his constant criticism made Jill feel like a worthless spiritual zombie.

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It all erupted one day when their 5-year-old son, Tyler\*, got the flu. Usually Mike and Jill tried natural remedies before seeing a doctor, but in this instance Tyler didn’t seem to be responding to the natural products. After he’d had a high fever for several days, Jill took the boy to the doctor, who told her Tyler had a respiratory infection that required antibiotics.

Jill had a prescription filled and intended to give a dose to Tyler immediately. But when Mike learned about the doctor’s report, he told Jill not to give Tyler the medicine.

No matter how much Jill pleaded, he refused—saying that the antibiotics might have negative side effects. Jill was so concerned for her son’s safety that she threatened to give the medicine to Tyler anyway. Mike then shot back: “I am the head of this house! You have to do what I say!”

Jill felt she'd been pushed into a corner by her husband's ironclad demands. Finally she placed the matter in God's hands.

The next morning Tyler was so sick he couldn't get up to the table to eat. Jill was desperate and dared to express her concerns. "Is it right to withhold something from him that you know will alleviate his symptoms and help him get well?" she asked.

Mike finally gave in. Within 24 hours Tyler had improved, and in only a few days he was well.

Mike and Jill, meanwhile, were nursing the wounds that had resulted from this quarrel. Mike's pride was hurt because he felt his leadership had been challenged.

Jill felt exhausted from having to push so hard to help her son. Their marriage was frayed in the process—and they eventually had to seek counseling.

These kinds of disagreements occur in Christian homes every day. In many cases, husbands and wives who argue over an issue agree to sit down, listen to each other, try to understand the other spouse's perspective and then decide on a resolution. That's the way conflict management is supposed to work.

But domestic strife can't be resolved if the husband believes: (1) that he is always right; (2) that it is wrong for him to defer to his wife; or (3) that his masculinity is weakened if he admits a mistake. If he believes all three of these fallacies, he qualifies as a first-degree tyrant.

### **Patriarchs Don't Live Here Anymore**

When I preach about gender equality in the church, many women come to me and say, "But I have been taught that my husband is the priest of the home." I challenge them to look up that phrase in the Bible. Show me one scripture that says husbands

should serve as priests for their wives!

Many Christian traditionalists maintain that women should live in the background and allow their husbands to represent them to the church and to God. They also teach that the husband is responsible for the wife's behavior, as if she were some kind of puppet on a string whom he must manipulate.

They have the audacity to use this unbiblical concept of the priestly husband to justify abusive, authoritarian behavior. This is emotionally crippling to women—and it is heresy!

The Bible tells us that under the old covenant, before the redemptive work of Christ and the advent of the Holy Spirit, God dealt with men through priests. But now that Jesus has secured our access into the presence of God, we all have been qualified to be priests unto God.

Peter says we are part of a "royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:9, NKJV). He does not say that this priesthood is exclusively male or that it refers to husbands. There is no reference to gender because "there is neither male nor female...in Christ" (Gal. 3:28).

Women have been clothed with the priestly garments of holiness, and they have been commissioned to exercise His authority. No husband has the biblical right to stand in his wife's way, and no wife should use "male headship" to excuse herself from fulfilling God's call on her life.

"Headship" is another popular word thrown around in conservative religious circles. Many Christian men believe their spirituality is measured by the level of control they exert over their wives through "male headship."

These guys think they are being "real men of God" if they refuse to listen to their wives' counsel. Where did we get the idea that an authoritarian style of leadership is even remotely Christlike?

The rigid view of the Christian family says that men have been placed in the God-ordained role of full-time boss. The husband's role, according to the conservative religious model, is to lead and protect his wife, while her role is to trust him and submit to his authority at all times without question. Since he is supposedly smarter, stronger and more spiritually capable, the woman has no option but to accept this arrangement.

This view has been derived by misreading the words of Paul in Ephesians 5:23–24: “For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.”

We must remember that at the time Paul penned these words (probably A.D. 60), women had no rights and were viewed as the property of either their fathers or their husbands. In Ephesus during New Testament times, a man's idea of “ruling the family” was to keep his wife shut away in the house to do backbreaking chores, tend the family farm, provide sexual gratification and bear as many children as possible.

If she died in childbirth, he found another wife. If she didn't please him in bed, he paid a younger woman outside the home to meet his sexual needs. If his wife shamed him, he beat her.

Historian Ruth Tucker notes that in ancient Greek society, most men considered their homebound wives boring—so they typically sought the companionship of *heterae*, or professional female escorts. Yet when Paul introduced the Christian message to the Ephesians, he came with a radically new model of family that went to the very core of what was wrong with the world: “Husbands, love your wives” (Eph. 5:25).

Perhaps we don't realize what a revolutionary concept these four words were in the first century! It was even more radical

when Paul told the men of Ephesus to love their wives “as their own bodies” (v. 28).

This meant that men and women were equals. It meant that Christian men would have to break out of their pagan Middle Eastern mind-set and stop looking down on the wives as if they were brainless, inferior animals. Paul’s simple words shattered gender prejudice at its core.

And when Paul told the men to love their wives “as Christ also loved the church” (v. 25), he implied something even more revolutionary: Women are just as deserving of the grace of God as men are. We find in these tender verses the bedrock foundation for the Christian idea of gender equality.

### **Two Kinds of Christian Husbands**

Paul’s words to the Ephesians blatantly contradicted the worldly philosophy of the ancient world, which taught that men and women live in two different social strata. In the kingdom of God, Paul declared, men don’t beat their wives, rule their homes like despots or threaten divorce as a means to manipulate or control. In God’s kingdom, husbands treat their wives with respect—yes, even as equals.

Paul was declaring in this passage that men are no longer “over” women. Husbands can no longer dominate their wives or treat them like chattel.

Now that Jesus Christ has come, the curse of male domination over females that began in the Garden of Eden has been broken. Women have been restored to a place of respect and dignity! This was good news for the women of Ephesus; it is good news for all women today.

But if this is true, then why does Paul still say the husband should function as the “head” of his wife? (See Eph. 5:23.) Does this not give him the right to dominate her? That depends on whether we want a Christian model of leadership or a

worldly one.

The husband does function as a leader. But the gospel of Jesus Christ—who was the ultimate example of the compassionate “servant leader”—does not allow men to impose leadership in an authoritarian way, nor can men view their role as “head” as part of a God-sanctioned hierarchy that places them over their wives to domineer them or to deny their rights.

Ephesians 5 is not about hierarchy; it is about equality. But if we read Paul’s words through a warped lens, it’s easy to impose our own misconceptions about male-female relationships on the text. That’s why we need the Holy Spirit to help us when we read the Scriptures.

Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, in her book, *Good News for Women* (Baker), explains that there are really two kinds of male headship from which to choose. One is what she calls “life-giving headship,” which was instituted by God in the Garden of Eden when He took Eve out of Adam’s side.

The opposing model is what she refers to as “ruling headship,” which began with the fall, when man and woman came under the curse of sin. Christian men today often view ruling headship as the godly way to lead a family—but it is the wrong model.

Writes Groothuis: “The biblical headship of the husband described in Ephesians 5 is redemptive, in that it mitigates the effect of the fall which places the woman under male rule, and it helps to reinstate woman in her creational place of cultural responsibility alongside man. In life-giving headship, the social privilege and power of maleness is shared by the husband with the wife, and utilized by him according to the terms of love rather than of male conquest and demand.”

Some Christian husbands have made a lifestyle out of being benevolent dictators—and they quote portions of Ephesians 5 to defend their behavior. Tragically, many women have embraced the idea of being Christian doormats, and they have made their

subservience such a part of their identity as women that it has become a place of security for them that they cannot abandon.

I pray you will not let a false concept of “male headship” stop you from fulfilling your high calling in Christ.

*J. Lee Grady is the editor of Charisma and author of 10 Lies the Church Tells Women (Charisma House), from which this article is adapted. This April he and his wife, Deborah, celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary.*

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## **Don't Block the Flow of the Holy Ghost**

*We often pray for more of the Holy Spirit's anointing. But if God gives you His power, will you actually use it?*

A few years ago the Lord challenged me about my level of spiritual hunger. He showed me that even though I had stood in many prayer lines and repeatedly sung the words, “Lord, I want more of You,” I wasn't as passionate for Him as I thought I was.

In 1999 my church sponsored a conference on the Holy Spirit. At the close of one service I was lying on the floor near the altar asking God for another touch of His power. Several other people were kneeling at the communion rail and praying quietly for each other.

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# 8 Signs You Have Toxic Faith

Legalistic religion is dangerous. Here's how you can detect and avoid the poison of a religious spirit. Take our test by examining these eight characteristics of a religious spirit.

**1. A religious spirit views God as a cold, harsh, distant taskmaster** rather than an approachable, loving Father. When we base our relationship with God on our ability to perform spiritual duties, we deny the power of grace. God does not love us because we pray, read our Bibles, attend church or witness, yet millions of Christians think God is mad if they don't perform these and other duties perfectly. As a result they struggle to find true intimacy with Jesus.

**2. A religious spirit places emphasis on doing outward things** to show others that God accepts him. We deceive ourselves into believing that we can win God's approval through a religious dress code, certain spiritual disciplines, particular music styles or even doctrinal positions.

**3. A religious spirit develops traditions and formulas** to accomplish spiritual goals. We trust in our liturgies, denominational policies or man-made programs to obtain results that only God alone can give.

**4. A religious spirit becomes joyless, cynical and hypercritical.** This can turn a home or a church completely sour. Then, whenever genuine joy and love are expressed, this becomes a threat to those who have lost the simplicity of true faith.

**5. A religious spirit becomes prideful and isolated,** thinking that his righteousness is special and that he cannot associate

with other believers who have different standards. Churches that allow these attitudes become elitist and dangerously vulnerable to deception or cult-like practices.

**6. A religious spirit develops a harsh, judgmental attitude toward sinners,** yet those who ingest this poison typically struggle with sinful habits that they cannot admit to anyone else. Religious people rarely interact with nonbelievers because they don't want their own superior morals to be tainted by them.

**7. A religious spirit rejects progressive revelation and refuses to embrace change.** This is why many churches become irrelevant to society. They become so focused on what God did 50 years ago that they become stuck in a time warp and cannot move forward when the Holy Spirit begins to open new understanding. When religious groups refuse to shift with God's new directives, they become "old wineskins" and God must find more flexible vessels that are willing to implement change.

**8. A religious spirit persecutes those who disagree with his self-righteous views** and becomes angry whenever the message of grace threatens to undermine his religiosity. An angry religious person will use gossip and slander to assassinate other peoples' character and may even use violence to prove his point. Jesus, in fact, warned His disciples: "There will even come a time when anyone who kills you will think he's doing God a favor" (John 16:2, The Message).

If the poison of religion has contaminated your walk with God, ask Him to pour a fresh understanding of His grace into your barren spirit—and then expect His new life to flow through you.

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## **8 Warning Signs of Toxic Faith**

*Legalistic religion is dangerous. Here's how you can detect and avoid the poison of a religious spirit.*

After Elisha watched Elijah ascend into heaven, the prophet went to the city of Jericho and performed his first miracle. The men of that city faced an environmental crisis: Their water was toxic, most likely because of the sulphur and other chemicals that had rained down upon nearby Sodom and Gomorrah years earlier. This poison had made the land barren (see 2 Kings 2:19-22) and it was probably affecting people and animals as well as plant life.

So Elisha performed a bold, prophetic act. He threw salt in the water and proclaimed: "Thus says the Lord, 'I have purified these waters; there shall not be from there death or unfruitfulness any longer'" (v. 21, NASB). His proclamation brought immediate cleansing.

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## **Getting Back to 'Classic' Christianity**

*We need voices from the past—like Andrew Murray, Corrie Ten Boom and Charles Spurgeon—to help us find our way to the*

*future.*

During a visit with my parents in Georgia, two of my daughters asked if they could listen to a tape recording my father made in 1962 when I was only 4 years old. So my dad rummaged through some drawers and found the old reel-to-reel tape, which was amazingly still intact. Then he went to the garage and found the old Realistic tape player that no one in the family had used since the Nixon administration.

To our surprise the scratchy tape actually played without breaking, and my girls laughed when they heard me—in a babyish Southern drawl—describing a Florida vacation and a fishing trip with my grandfather. After my “interview,” it switched to an older recording made in 1956. It included a conversation with my dad’s mother, who died before I was born.

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## **An Untold Horror: A Review of ‘The Stoning of Soraya M.’**

*It took an independent film company to make a movie that exposes the cultural oppression of women in the Middle East.*

Millions of women around the world live under the ironfisted rule of male domination. They are gang-raped in Latin America; their genitals are mutilated in parts of Africa; they are forced to wear burkas in Afghanistan; they are sold as sex slaves in Thailand; they are denied education in India. Yet

most westerners are oblivious to this cruel injustice. It's out of sight, out of mind.

But now, thanks to an independent film company and a director who cares about issues that Hollywood ignores, we have a movie that exposes the plight of women in Iran. It hit theaters last weekend, just a few weeks after Iran's authoritarian government came under international scrutiny.

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## Stop the Ego Show

**Over the past 30 years many of our churches have developed a sterile religious atmosphere. How can we reclaim relational Christianity?**

A friend in Alabama recently told me about a preacher who came to his city in unusual style. The man arrived at a church in a limousine and was whisked into a private waiting room behind the stage area. The evangelist told people in his entourage to leave the engine running so the temperature inside his car would remain constant.

This evangelist then preached to a waiting crowd, took up his own offering and retired to the waiting room for refreshments. Then he left the church without speaking to the host pastor.

*Slam! Bam!* Gone! It was like a spiritual drive-by shooting.

This guy's faith may have been inspiring, but his love was as cold as the air inside his oversized vehicle. His behavior shows us why so many ministries today are in crisis. We've created a monster—a version of Christianity that is slick, marketable and event-driven but lacking in authentic impact. It is as one-dimensional as a flat-screen TV—and a total

turnoff to people who are starving for genuine relationships.

This preacher's style is the opposite of the apostle Paul's. He wrote: "Even though we had some standing as Christ's apostles, we never threw our weight around or tried to come across as important. ... We weren't aloof with you. ... We were never patronizing, never condescending, but we cared for you the way a mother cares for her children" (1 Thess. 2:6-7, *The Message*).

Paul's ministry style is best visible in his relationship with his spiritual son Timothy, who often traveled with him. More than one-fourth of the 27 books in the New Testament were written either by Paul to Timothy or by Paul and Timothy to various churches. This proves that real Christianity is not about pulpits, meetings, suits and ties, microphones, entourages or air-conditioned limousines. It has everything to do with relationships.

How can we reclaim relational Christianity? Here's a start:

**1. Become accessible.** Jesus modeled accessibility against the backdrop of an austere religious culture. The rabbis in Jesus' day were obsessed with robes and public pontifications while they avoided the common people. Meanwhile Jesus held children, ate with tax collectors and showed affection to His disciples.

Over the past 30 years many of our churches have developed a sterile religious atmosphere that includes clerical titles, "armor bearers" and long-winded sermons that always end on cue with a financial appeal. The younger generation is rejecting this because they can see the emperor has no clothes. Churches that want to grow will have to ditch the old paradigms.

**2. Open your life.** I regularly meet ministry leaders who say they have no friends. Some fear that if they admit struggles or weaknesses they will lose their jobs. Others have never had spiritual mentors. They are relationally empty.

This dam must break. Hearts must open, honest confession must flow and godly friendships must be forged if we hope to offer healing to our fractured, love-starved generation.

**3. Develop effective discipleship models.** I've never seen a healthy, growing church that didn't have an organic small-group system. Real disciples are not made on an assembly line; they are fashioned with loving care in intimate, relational settings.

One of the main reasons I am serving God today is that a youth leader named Barry St. Clair took me under his wing when I was 15 and nurtured me in a small-group Bible study for more than three years. Barry, at age 30, was already a successful author and speaker and a busy husband and father, but he took the time to invest in a Southern Baptist teenager by including me on ministry trips and praying with me about personal problems.

Barry became a trusted counselor after I went into ministry. He stood with me at my wedding. He prayed over me at my ordination. He still writes me encouraging notes—35 years after he taught me to have a quiet time with God.

Let's get back to the basics. After the inaccessible preachers have driven off in their limousines, we are still called to make disciples. And we can't fulfill that mandate until we stop this silly ego show and embrace a humble ministry style that puts relationships first.

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