

Other Books In The “Listening” Trilogy

No Delusions – a faith filtered through the meanness of this world

As a teenager Roger Dewey began to explore the differences between Christianity and Jesus. He put himself outside his comfort zone, where he “didn’t even know the rules,” to see if God would show up, to see if he could hear the still, small voice of Jesus. On the day of the funeral of Martin Luther King, Roger felt impelled to leave grad school and commit his life to justice for the excluded and combating racism in the church. He “shut up and listened” for the counsel of God. Never really liking prayer, he learned simply to talk with Jesus about everything and to be silent and listen for a response. Yet slowly he realized he was becoming as self-righteous as those he was criticizing. So he took a three month “hermitage,” fasting from everything conceptual to listen more effectively. He received again the affirmation of God’s unconditional love for all of us, exactly as we are, not as we ought to be. This trilogy of books is the result.

The Hitchhiking Diaries

In his twenties Roger hitchhiked throughout Latin America to learn if indigenous people already knew—before the missionaries—that God knew them and accepted them personally. He heard their stories in country after country. The entire time was a life-changing, extended adventure of walking with Jesus into the complete unknown. It set the course for Roger’s life of trusting Jesus and his certainty of God’s unconditional acceptance of us all. Each evening Roger wrote that day’s experiences, including verbatim conversations. These now have been edited only for clarity, so this is an honest record of Roger’s thoughts as a young man. His diary chronicles the slow radicalization of beginning to understand the poverty of those he loved in Latin America.

**The Bible They Never
Told Me About**

Roger Dewey

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Forgive my sons who claim the Light
Yet see through such dark glass
Anorexics they appear to you
So small where I am vast
Their plastic Jesus kept you away
Like their sad trust in war
They simply can't imagine
That it's them I'm crying for

Dear Leonard, Roger Dewey

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Preface

Most people today ignore the Bible. And I don't blame them. I mean, it is mostly used as a book of rules for the convinced and a justifier for political anger and denials, especially against LGBTs. And strangely, the Bible's advocates reject Jesus' main point: that there is a living supernatural force who accepts us just as we are, with all our excesses and hang-ups, and wants to help us find the most amazing life we can imagine.

If you have been turned off by self-righteous religion, with its sexual abuse by priests, its boring, demanding rules, its medieval God who torments those who make mistakes, and its justifications for anger, wars, racism, sexism, and ignoring the poor, I hope you will read on. This book is a summation of seventy years of discovering that the Bible has a lot more to say than I was being told. As a teenager I began to realize that in church a lot of the good stuff was being left out, and in its place I was hearing the limited religious message that I was not good enough, and never would be, and that God was angry with me. But I knew that was not true of Jesus. I remember saying to myself, out loud, "I'm not going to let them shut me out. Jesus is too important!"

But relax. I am not one of those who have uncovered deep secrets hidden in the texts, just waiting for a superior intellect like mine to explain them. Quite the reverse. All the truly important things in life can be understood by illiterate peasants or else God is not loving and just. In fact, it was my hope in God's unconditional acceptance that first led me to question the religion I was hearing.

By exploring life with Jesus, my friend, I discovered a lot of the good stuff I was not being told. Elsewhere¹ I have written the stories of those adventures. Over time I learned that Jesus was not a demanding god with a rule book and a stop watch but a friend who will heal and help those of us who want to walk with him. And for decades, the simple biblical insights now collected in these pages have given me and many others a freedom to experience less anxiety, stress, and depression and to find the peace, creativity and security we all desire. And even some adventure. That can be your story as well.

¹ *No Delusions* and *The Hitchhiking Diaries*

The Bible They Never Told Me About

When I was a kid, I went to so many church services, prayer meetings, and Bible studies that by osmosis I memorized almost every Jesus story in the poetic language of the King James Bible. But Jesus became far more to me than ancient stories. He was so real and so outrageously accepting of people like me that I began to talk easily with him, about everything. Also, my parents and church encouraged me to read the Bible as if we could take Jesus at his word. Sure, we could misunderstand—we are only human—but Jesus’ warmth and acceptance gave me the security I needed to risk leaps of faith.

For years, whatever discrepancies I discovered between Jesus and the culture in the churches, I attributed to their standard explanation that “Christians are not perfect, just forgiven.” It was impossible for me to imagine that our church could be *opposed* to Jesus. But in my twenties, when I began living in low-income and black communities and sharing my experiences with suburban churches it became increasingly difficult to reconcile what I was seeing with what people said the Bible said. So I formed a little shelf in my brain for storing such discrepancies. They were far too important to forget.

Actually, I think I created that shelf back when I was a teenager, maybe seventeen. How, I had wondered, could I respect a God so uncreative as to develop no alternative to allowing billions of those

he loves (at the time my God was all male) to suffer eternal tortures of fire? Just for not *loving* him! An abuser! That seemed less than human. Totally unjust. Frankly, evil. And completely unlike the Jesus I was beginning to explore life with. That was the reason for the shelf.

I grew up with an unrealistic acceptance of all things conservative. Then, over the years, Jesus reshaped my views on almost everything—sex, money, security, success, vacations, work, nationalism, marriage, military service, death and taxes. His perspective on our world and how we can enjoy it seemed completely different from the religious worldviews around me, both conservative and liberal. That all shows up in this book. But my changes began when I needed to question what I was hearing in churches about the poor. So that is where I begin this book, back when I first studied the Old Testament prophets. Claiming to speak for God, they constantly berated kings for their nations' mistreatment of the weak.

Poverty is a really big deal to God

I discovered that God's commitment to the weak was repeated throughout the entire Bible. There are *thousands* of such passages, with many variations. Yet in churches in the 1970's, as I raised support for my justice work in what we called "the inner-city," *one* sentence kept being repeated to me as if it summarized the whole Bible: "The poor you will have with you always." (Deuteronomy 15:11) And it was usually said dismissively, as if poverty was not an important moral concern, at least not one our government should respond to. Often the person exuded confidence that this verse totally proved that point. (And I probably should admit my own arrogance as I quoted the Bible back.)

People always seemed surprised when I told them this verse was followed immediately by "*therefore* I command you to be open-

handed.” The only other time it’s in the Bible was when Jesus said it, (Matthew 26:11) to communicate “you will never run out of reasons for generosity.” The Bible says the opposite of what church culture told me.

The back story to that comment by Jesus is that he so normally encouraged sacrifice for the poor that his disciples expected *praise* when they criticized extravagance. But this time, Jesus said, was different. It was *appropriate* for someone to splurge to anoint him for his death—the most important event in history. It also seemed important to Jesus to show that even a good thing like helping poor people is not a law that tells us what to do and judges us for our failures. Jesus tells us to love others the way we love ourselves, but he never tries to spell out the specifics. He trusts our creativity. Jesus never supports my tendency to distort his words into one more way to judge others and feel superior. In fact, he tells me specifically not to judge others. So Jesus helped me find a whole new way to read the Bible, a gracious way that actually made it interesting and enlivening.

It took me years to admit that when good religious people raise a biblical objection to government’s care for the poor, they simply betray their lack of interest in what the Bible actually says. Instead, they express their prior commitment to today’s self-oriented religious culture that seeks to cut taxes by blaming the poor for their own poverty.

The second most common verse quoted back to me in churches was “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.” (2 Thessalonians 3:10) Again, people showed no interest in its context. But back then, Jesus’ followers met in house churches and “all the believers had everything in common.” (Acts 2:44) Their communal culture developed out of their family-like relationship to God and to each other. When people shared everything equally, Paul’s words were not harsh or mean. But in America’s individualistic selfish culture

this Bible verse usually rationalizes an anti-welfare perspective, as if poor people are lazy and undeserving and God endorses their impoverishment. Once again, early in my life, I saw good religious people distort God's words for their own benefit without apparently realizing what they were doing.

If you focus on Bible trees you will miss the exciting forest

Jesus' view of this world differs fundamentally from anything we know. Despite the claims of partisans, he is not expressed by conservatism or liberalism or any philosophy. I think that is demonstrated repeatedly in the pages that follow. Jesus' perspective is higher, cosmic and transcendent, yet he is actively involved in the nitty gritty of our lives. He is beyond our understanding, and yet all the essentials are comprehensible by the simplest peasant.

What an amazing experiment! Jesus promises to exchange the bullying, perpetual outrage of our culture for the freedom to take leaps of faith, for a genuine passion for life, for living without fear and pretense, for knowing we are totally accepted, for being freed from our ugly self-righteousness. When we actually trust God, and not our need to be in charge, or to be 'right,' Jesus offers us the enlightenment of a functional relationship with the eternal One.

When you and I lower the barriers we built to protect ourselves from religion, we can walk with the spirit of the universe in all its fullness. Instead of reaching for the light by getting our stuff together, being disciplined, and doing right things, God has come to us. The religious phrase is that transcendence became immanent and lived among us. Yet our fear of abusive religion and its manipulations—a *highly appropriate fear*—keeps this Jesus entombed. For our own sakes, we want to roll away the stone and experience him.

So my reason for writing is not to give new, correct interpretations of the Bible. Despite the fact that I discuss these