



Front Cover

From Catholic Nun To New Testament Christian

Who am I? Where am I going? How do I get there? This continuing quest for truth and inner peace was the consuming desire that persuaded me to invest nineteen years of my life in serving God as a Roman Catholic nun.

Totally committed to a life of self-surrender and self-sacrifice as a nun, I was unaware of how simple and accessible God's plan for my salvation was. Only after an intense search and study of God's Word, was the master plan for my salvation revealed to me. I then became born again through the waters of baptism.

My name is Joanne Howe. I am a member of God's New Testament church. I would like to share with you my personal struggles and restlessness in groping for a life that would satisfy the longings of my heart. I would like to share with you how I discovered God's manifestation in my life and the spiritual strength, meaningful happiness and purpose in life I have received from obeying the Gospel.

I dedicate these humble efforts to Christ who loved me so, to my parents, who initially instilled within me a great love of God, and to Mr. Paul Coffman, a minister of the gospel and human instrument God used in bringing His lost sheep home. Without Paul's assistance, I would still be trying to find the answers to the question: Who am I? Where am I going? How do I get there?

As a small child, I had a dream that one day everything in my life would belong solely to God. I said to my mother one day, "I am going to become a nun so that I can serve God in a special way and belong to Him forever." At the age of six, I began to study to pursue my dream.

I am the first born of ten children of profoundly devout Catholic parents from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. My father had studied for the priesthood for eleven years. The year preceding his scheduled ordination to the priesthood, he met and married my

mother. After several years of marriage, he succeeded in converting her from Russian Orthodox faith to Roman Catholicism.

In those days it was a ruling of the Roman Catholic Church that any child produced from the marriage had to be reared in the Catholic faith. My mother, complying with the church's wishes, reared her children conscientiously according to the dictates of Roman Catholicism.

Because I was the oldest, I was trained quite rigidly in the rudiments of Roman Catholicism. Wishing to please my parents as most children do, I built within myself a strong idealism taking care to adhere precisely to Catholic doctrine. Everything in my life was centered around pleasing God. Often when I failed, I was cautioned by my mother that I was hurting God and I would go to Hell. I learned extremely early to both fear and love God at the same time.

At the age of ten I experienced the disappearance and death of my nine-year old brother, Raymond. The search for him over a period of two months caused my parents tremendous suffering. As a child I was overwhelmed, seeing them so distraught and in constant anguish. One night, as I knelt down to pray, I promised God that, if He would reveal my brother's whereabouts, I would dedicate my life to Him, as a nun. The very next day my prayer was answered, and the remains of my brother's body was recovered from a densely wooded area several miles from our home. We discovered later my brother had died fighting for his virtue, at the hands of a practicing homosexual. I vowed that I would never forget my commitment to God, because of his answer to my earnest prayer in a desperate time of need.

At the age of thirteen when most of my grade-school classmates were preparing to attend regular Catholic high schools, I decided to apply to a preparatory school for girls, whose sole goal was the refining and pruning of girl's characters and personalities for the religious life.

My father had a sister who had been a Roman Catholic nun for fifteen years with the "community" called the Sisters of St. Francis from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was she who arranged for me to come to her community's preparatory school. My

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parents, having the responsibility of caring for eight other children, were unable to pay the tuition required. The community willingly accepted the burden for my education.

I can still remember the day I said good-bye to all of my little sisters and one brother. I wasn't sad, because I was on my way to fulfilling my dream of doing something great and outstanding for God as a "special" servant in his church. In the eyes of my parents, I was God's special gift to them. I had been called apart from the world to represent our family in the vineyard of the Lord. To a Catholic, a child called to follow a religious vocation is a special favor with the Lord. Never having been away from home before, my experience for the next three years proved to be emotionally, psychologically and socially frustrating.

Highly trained as an aspirant for a religious community of the Roman Catholic Church, my life at this young age was indoctrinated with religious-formation principles according to the rules of the community to which I aspired. I was not permitted to wear makeup of any kind, and my clothing consisted of a standard uniform. It was difficult for me to adjust to wearing long woolen stockings, a corset with heavy stays, and the granny shoes that were so ugly-looking to me as

a girl of just thirteen. My blonde hair had to be pulled back into a net and worn behind my ears at shoulder length.

My daily schedule consisted of rising at 6:30 A.M., followed by morning prayers, breakfast, and classes beginning at 8:30 A.M. As a boarder, I attended a regular high school on the premises of the motherhouse. Selected students from wealthy families were bused in from the surrounding areas in the city, as this was considered an exclusive high school for girls. I can well remember watching those girls, wishing I had the freedom to come and go as they did. I remember, too, having mixed emotions because I could not do what they did, wear what they wore, or experience what they talked about. Yet, I kept reminding myself that I was "special" and that I had been selected to commit my life to God. I often heard the day students laugh and make fun of the clothing I wore, and then I heard the nuns discipline them harshly, emphasizing to the day students that the preparatory students were exceptional and specially chosen to do God's work in his church. It was then that feelings of superiority began to be nurtured in my character.

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My visits home were limited to holidays and summer vacations. Daily, when the day students boarded buses to return to their families, an emptiness and longing filled my soul. As I watched them leave, I longed to be with my own sisters and brother. I ached to love and be loved. I often wished that I could have gone to my own mother when I was perplexed and confused. Instead, I was told that I was to learn to give up my family and to dedicate my life completely to God. Consequently, when troubled times entered my life, I sought the advice of my peers, inasmuch as this was the only way I knew to cope and live a life especially for God. I was afraid the directress of the preparatory school might think me not strong enough to cope with the problems of life and of growing up. I thought that if I revealed my frustrations, I would ultimately be sent home and I would bring disgrace to my family. I found numerous ways of escaping the normal problems of adolescence. In later years, I discovered that this pattern pervaded my life.

At the end of my junior year, I was permitted to apply for entrance into the community to which I aspired. At that time, my father was reluctant to grant his permission. He felt that I not enough experience in the outside world to make such a decision with respect to my future. At his request, I entered another girls' Catholic high school. This was located nearer my home and it was there that I completed my senior year.

During that year at home with my family, I kept in touch with several of my grade-school teachers (who were the Sisters of St. Joseph from Baden, Pennsylvania), and they encourage me to apply for entrance to the community's postulancy. Since my strongest desire had always been to give my life totally to God, I anxiously made this known to the mother superior of the community. I applied, and was accepted as a candidate to their postulancy.

With indescribably joy, I entered the postulancy of the Sisters of St. Joseph on September 18, 1953, three months to the day from my high school graduation. I

was accompanied to the motherhouse by my eighth-grade teacher, my two younger sisters (ages three and four) and my parents. It was here that I would continue my preparation for my life's task. My long-awaited dream was becoming a reality.

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My mother had a strong love for Mary, the mother of Jesus. The day I entered the postulancy she told me that, like Mary, mine was the single honor of intimately helping Jesus accomplish His work of saving souls. She knew how difficult it was for me to leave my family, because I had never really gotten to know my brother and sisters, or spend any of the precious time I had desired to with them in growing up. Nevertheless, she encouraged me to press on toward my goal, reassuring me that the family would be blessed as a result of my sacrifice. I conditioned myself emotionally that I was now identifying with God's special chosen family. I believed that I would find all the answers to the needs I had so longed for since my first departure from home—the need to love and be loved.

Upon entering the motherhouse of the community where I was to reside for the next sixteen years, I was clothed with a postulant's black cape, a black headdress, and a black gown that came in three sizes of small, medium and large. There were twenty other girls who entered with me and, at that time, there were a total of ninety novices in the community's novitiate. The novitiate was the probationary and training program for those entering the religious life.

We were all given maternal welcomes by the mother superior, her council, the mistress of novices, and her assistant. Clothed in a postulant's dress, I was then presented to my family, and permitted to visit with them for one hour. At this time, I was singled out to have my picture taken for a magazine called the "Prepster," a religious pamphlet circulated throughout the diocese of Pittsburgh.

The purpose of this magazine was to encourage other girls to want to seek this type of life. Having been selected for such an important display, I began to feel quite special and extremely happy. If this was the way in which I could best serve God, I wanted to contribute all I could to further his kingdom. My adjustment to a change in environment and the regimentation required of me seemed not too difficult from that which was required of me in the preparatory school. As a postulant, however, I learned stronger disciplines and more sacrifices were expected. I learned what it meant to give up personal comforts in preparation for the dedicated service I would consecrate myself to as a nun.

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Initially, I became bewildered as I walked down long, dark hallways, observing the nuns with their eyes downcast, never speaking, and running the instant a bell rang. I learned that if I was ill during the night, or had unresolved problems, I could choose to endure my situation in silence or to speak to the mistress or her

assistant in her sleeping quarters. Since disturbing the mistresses was discouraged, I often went to God with my problems.

When our group had its first interview with the mistress of novices in a room called the "novitiate" (a huge room where post the postulants and novices gathered for prayer, study and personal growth), we were asked to hand in all of our personal belongings. This perplexed me. Questioning the reason why and expecting to be understood, I freely confided in the mistress. It had been my custom to be open and honest with those in authority. To my dismay I was told that I was arrogant, and I was put on penance for a week. The punishment consisted of being totally isolated from the rest of community. It was then that I began to learn their meaning of the word "discipline." I later learned that this action was taken to make me humble. I also learned that I was to hand in everything that I received from home. I was permitted to own nothing. My mail was opened and read before I received it. I was to have no communication with the outside world without permission.

I was not allowed to own a mirror. Several mirrors were installed in the general bathroom areas for public use. To discourage vanity from creeping into my life, I was forbidden to use a personal mirror.

As I tried to acclimate to the rules and regulations of the community, I constantly consoled myself that, for God nothing could be too difficult to endure. I was there to become His bride, and I would be strong in the face of whatever occurred. Often, in opposition to the feelings I felt within, I suffered in silence. Because I was forthright by nature, this acquiescence was extremely difficult for me. I believed, however, that as a future nun, I had to suffer in silence. Having made the forward step, I believed that there was no turning back.

When the six months of my postulancy ended, I was presented to the mother superior and her council for acceptance into the

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novitiate. Acceptance in the novitiate consists of spend a probationary period of two years in the novitiate before taking temporary vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

In preparation for my induction into the novitiate, I was presented in a ceremony to the public, dressed as a bride. The reception took place in the chapel of the motherhouse. The ceremony was considered a "very" special occasion, and the Bishop of the Diocese of Pittsburgh officiated. Many of the clergy of other parishes were in attendance. I was permitted to send invitations to many of my friends. My entire family was permitted to witness this "glorious" occasion. I pledged in the presence of all assembled my total dedication to God.

During the ceremony, a long black cloth was draped over my white wedding gown, symbolizing that I was to be officially dad to the world, and that I would be identified in the future as a nun in the habit of the congregation of my choice. I

received my new name (Sister Jean Raymond), thus signifying that I was to be identified as a new person, married to Christ and to his church.

I remember vividly the discomfort I felt while clothed in a heavy black woolen robe. Starched white linens were wrapped tightly about my face and the total effect was that of a mummy being encased! I studied the long dangling robes symbolizing my death to the world. I was proud of them.

A rope known as a cincture was slipped around my waist, and attached to the cincture was a pair of heavy wooden rosary beads. A white plastic bib worn on the front of my chest deterred any femininity that might have been exposed.

Although the ceremony overwhelmed and depressed many of my guests, to me it was joyous occasion! I was dedicating my life to God as a bride of Christ!

Pictures were not permitted to be taken on this occasion. One of my uncles, however, did manage to get a camera into the chapel; he took pictures of me first as a bride and than as a nun.

Following several hours of rejoicing with my family and friends, I returned to the novitiate to have every lock of my long

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blonde hair shaved from my head. A woman's hair was considered her most important asset, and I had to offer it all to God.

My first year in the novitiate was to be known as the "Year of Silence." During this period, I had no communication whatsoever with the outside world. I was trained in the art of prayer and meditation. I was taught and I studied the laws of the congregation (known as the Holy Rule), Canon Law (which was the governing law of the Roman Catholic Church) and the doctrine written for the Baltimore Catechism, which I later taught in a parochial school. I became highly skilled and knowledgeable in the content areas of each.

During this year, I was carefully observed by the mistress of novices and her assistant. They determined each novice's potential as a future worker for the community, giving special consideration to developing individual talents.

As a novice, I was introduced to the more severe disciplines of the community, which were unknown to outsiders, even to the postulants. Each week the group of novices gathered together in the novitiate to attend a meeting know as the Chapter of Faults. Here each one publicly confessed her faults to the entire group. If anyone had an accusation to make against another, she could do so at this time. Depending on the seriousness of the fault, the individual was given a penance that consisted of saying prayers with one's arms outstretched, or of imposed absence from community recreation periods and general gatherings.

On Friday evenings before retiring, we gathered together in the novitiate when it began to get dark for another form of penance called "The Discipline." During this ritual, I was required to whip myself on the buttocks with a small iron chain, and in the process, chant a prayer called "Out of the Depths." This same prayer was chanted over the bodies of deceased nuns. The reasoning behind the ritual, we were told, was twofold: (1) Because our flesh was weak and sinful we were to punish the body for its many sins and (2) we were to atone for the sins of mankind.

Both the Chapter of Faults and The Discipline were practiced by all other nuns throughout the community. Can you imagine my shock when I was introduced those practices?

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The novitiate was designed to be a time of spiritual growth, and the hierarchy carefully observed each one's ability to acclimate to the rigorous disciplines imposed upon her.

I tried extremely hard to conform (at least externally) to all their dictates. Often, however, I asked myself the question, "Will the rest of my religious life be one of constant downgrading of my individual worth?"

Perhaps the discipline that I resented most was the need to ask permission to use small things such as pins, buttons, paper and clothing items. All of my actions were strictly monitored. Even my movements from one part of the house to another were controlled. Upon entering or leaving a room, I was required to acknowledge the person in charge and to request permission to enter or to leave. Whenever I was late for any type of exercise, I had to excuse myself before the superior in charge, on my knees with my hands joined inside of my long dangling black sleeves. I kissed the floor before going to bed at night. I kissed the floor any time I was asked to perform an act of humility.

When passing another nun in the hallway, I was required to say, "Praise Be Jesus Christ." The appropriate response was "Now and Forever, Amen." If I did not utter this response, particularly to a member of the hierarchy, I usually heard about it at the Chapter of Faults. Since I had not yet taken my temporary vows, I was not permitted to speak with other nuns who were considered finally professed in the motherhouse.

I came to a point in the middle of my novitiate training at which I could take the restrictions no longer. Tearfully, I appealed to the mistress of novices to call my mother for I had decided to go home. She attempted to dissuade me for a week, telling me that I would be a great asset to the community and to the work of God. When she saw that she was no longer convincing me, and that I was determined more than ever to leave, my parents were sent for by the mistress.

I can remember running into my mother's arms crying, and her lovingly consoling me. My mother felt that everything would work itself out. She told me of a dream

that she had the previous night in which a milk pump at the motherhouse overflowed at the end of the farm. The motherhouse had a dairy

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farm that provided the necessary dairy products need for over five hundred in residence there. From her dream, she could recall some one running and calling my name, Sister Jean Raymond, and I was nowhere to be found. She also remembered a nun saying, "Only Sister Jean Raymond can turn off the pump." Listening to her and believing her implicitly, I decided that I would remain in the convent. Reluctantly, I returned to the mother superior and told her I had decided to give it one more try. It took me fourteen years to come to the conclusion that I should have left at that time!

During my second year in the novitiate, I was not allowed to engage in the external work of the community, such as teaching and nursing. However, my abilities and talents and their potential for the betterment of the community were being scrutinized. Since our congregation was mainly a teaching community, my second year as a novice was geared toward preparing for college entrance exams. I had to evidence during this time my mental capabilities for the work of a teacher. I was also taught many domestic chores during this period of training. This year consisted of long hours of studying, testing, and evaluating. I determined that I would succeed in whatever I was assigned. The blueprint of my life was starting to take shape. The master plan was becoming very evident!

At the end of the second year of my novitiate training, I applied to the mother superior and her elected council for permission to take my temporary vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. At this time I was presented to them in a private audience. They questioned me thoroughly on my knowledge of the congregation's Holy Rule, Canon Law and the Catechism.

They also examined my motives for wishing to remain in the community. Inasmuch as I was considered suitable, I was temporarily admitted to the profession for a period of three years. The vote of the council at this time was deliberative, and after three years, if I wished to remain in the community, the council's vote was only then consultative. In other words, when I took my temporary vows, it was then decided as to whether I was acceptable for community life.

The day came when I was to end the period of my novitiate training and become a temporary professed nun.

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In a closed ceremony in the chapel in front of the congregation assembled, after replying affirmatively to a priest, to the question, "Are you acting of your own free will to take your vows of poverty, chastity and obedience?" I was formally

accepted by the community, with the mother superior and her council in attendance. I then pronounced my vows openly to all assembled, to hone and keep the vows poverty, chastity and obedience according to the rules of the congregation and under the guidance of the superiors in charge. I also promised to practice with God's grace the most profound humility in all things and the most cordial charity toward my neighbor.

After this ceremony, I was assigned to work in one of the community's missions as a teaching nun. My first assignment was to be located within a fifteen minute drive from my house. However, as a temporarily professed nun, I was not allowed the privilege of seeing my family other than on visiting days.

At the end of my three year probationary period, I was presented in a ceremony to sign the "Act of Final Profession." In this document, I agreed to the same commitment I had made when taking my temporary vows. Now, however, my name was sent to Rome to be placed in the archives of the Holy See for Religious Congregations. I received a thick, heavy crucifix to be worn openly on my breast, symbolizing my complete dedication and final commitment to God. A crown of white carnations was placed on my head as a sign of victory. I had finally made the goal!

Parents were not encouraged to attend the ceremony, as it was closed to the public. In order that my aunt (a nun) could witness the act of my final consecration to God as a nun, my father was permitted to accompany her; he had provided the transportation for her to attend. I was now recognized by the community as a "Final Professed Nun." Inwardly, I was not convinced that this was the way I had envisioned serving a God I had loved so much.

Throughout my years of training, and even during my years as a professed nun, I was constantly reminded that my perfection consisted in the perfect observance of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. By the vows of obedience, I was expected to obey the command of the lawful superior in all

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things that pertained to the rules of the congregation and the laws of the church. Regardless of whether I agreed with the superior, her word was law, and the decision rested finally with her. I was not allowed to question and I was kept spiritually dependent upon her decision: the superior was "always right." She had the permission to interpret God's will for me. Of all my vows, I found this vow the most difficult to observe. I was often told to do things that not even civil law would impose upon me, much less God's law. From early childhood, obedience had become a part of my innermost being, and to shrug off a command lightly was inconceivable.

The vow of chastity meant that I was to refrain from any act that was opposed to the sixth or ninth commandment of the Roman Catholic Church. This meant that I was not to indulge in idolatry or covetousness toward any one person, place or thing. I was to avoid idleness, "dangerous" reading, and familiarity with a secular.

A "secular" was any person who was not religious. I was not permitted to engage in any sentimental or particular friendships with my fellow nuns or with people of the opposite sex. I was not allowed to be seen with the same religious person too often. "Particular friendships" with nuns were regarded as having a potential for lesbianism.

To further avoid any type of closeness between two nuns, we were put on total silence at nine o'clock at night. This silence was known as the "Grand Silence." Breaking this rule became a matter of committing mortal sin, to be confessed in confession. When the superior rang the bell for lights out, I was not permitted to engage in any type of communication with another nun. I did not know until years later that this was intended to discourage intimate relationships with another in the privacy of the bedroom area.

I was not permitted to undress in front of another nun because this might have provoked impure and immodest thoughts. This, too, was in opposition to my vow of chastity. I can remember when I first learned of this philosophy in the novitiate. My first night, in the huge dormitory, where I was to sleep for a period of three years, I was told to get dressed and undressed under a huge white nightgown. Can you imagine what it was like to unhook, unbutton and unsnap in a contorted position such as this? However, I eventually became quite an expert at it!

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I became more confused than ever about having a friend, and I never really developed a close or sincere friendship until after I left the congregation.

It was becoming more difficult for me to get used to the different customs the community adhered to with respect to people outside the community's walls. I was not permitted to establish any kind of relationship that might hinder my relationship with God. I found that it was easy for me to make friends among seculars with whom I came in contact in my teaching experience. On occasions they invited me to their homes. I had to refuse, for I was not permitted to visit or eat in the homes of seculars. I had to get permission every time I wanted to write a letter to them. I became extremely limited in my contacts with other people. Ultimately, I trusted only a few. Developing a close relationship was an arduous task!

The religious practices that place in the novitiate were similar to the ones I later experienced in mission life. Monthly, we had a Sunday set aside for spiritual growth and to consider our responsibilities to the community. This was called "Silent Sunday." I was to keep silent on this day, and unless it was my turn to prepare meals for the community, I was not permitted to do any type of mental or physical work. I was encouraged to do a lot of spiritual reading and meditating in the chapel.

The community also provided a week's retreat each year for those who were finally professed. We performed the same types of exercises at the retreat as we did in the novitiate, except that this situation was considered sacred, and those

participating had to so in complete silence for a period of six days. During that time, I prayed, meditated and could speak to my superiors about any problem that might be of concern to me. I heard much about the sanctity of the state of our profession, but I was becoming so frustrated that neither I nor anyone else seemed to be reaching that goal of sanctity. I was always encouraged to try to improve, and I was reprimanded severely, often publicly, if my mistakes became too noticeable. Thus, I became conditioned to the idea that I was not allowed to be human or to fail. I was told that I was a special servant of God, superior to all others who not of the chosen ranks in the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, I could not afford to be weak or to fail. I was to be an example to the weaker members of the church.

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During the course of my nineteen years of convent life, I tried in desperation to fulfill my dream of becoming perfect and serving God completely. I was active in almost every type of service provided by the congregation in the teaching field. Being a music teacher, I was especially responsible for supplementing the weekly budget for the meals. I learned well all the domestic chores required of me, and I came to be known and appreciated as a very zealous and dedicated hard worker. Two problems consistently manifested themselves: (1) I had no friends, and (2) I was not happy. God was really the only one to whom I could talk. Once, again I spent most of my free time in the chapel trying to hear His direction for me in my life.

In January of 1965, a questionnaire came from Rome as a result of the Second Vatican Council. This questionnaire was an appeal to the superiors in each congregation to undertake a renovation of the lives of the religious in their community. Two of the questions on the questionnaire stand out poignantly in my memory. "Have you found among your fellow nuns, superiors, or others, help for your spiritual life?" and "Have you found a true friendship in the congregation to which you belong?" To both of these questions I had to reply in the negative. I had never experienced true, unselfish affection among my fellow nuns or the congregation-at-large. I had seen only an outward pretence of love. A portion of the questionnaire had to do with the attitudes of superiors. Generally, my superiors were too occupied with outside matters to attend to my specific spiritual needs. They had become too busy with "things" and seemed incapable of sharing their time and love with their subordinates.

At one point, I began to believe that the convents were diabolically saturated because of the constant abuses on the part of those behind its walls. Gossiping, backbiting, and cynicism became frequent and proved to be totally unnecessary and unjustifiable. Various religious ceremonies became empty and unfulfilling for me. I witnessed great lack of charity among my fellow companions. I was appalled that those who were rude and uncaring toward others could participate so nonchalantly in religious functions that were intended to give praise to God.

As more changes arose because of the Second Vatican Council in 1962, I began to realize the dual values that were occurring within convent life. I had never met the love or perfection I had

been told I and other would acquire through self-dedication to the religious life. I said to myself repeatedly, "Truth is unquestionable. It never changes and it will always endure!" I could see where I too was becoming impregnated with a double standard. I was engaged in a conflict of either resisting or surrendering. Finally, after wrestling with these conflicts and experiencing much torture from within, I requested permission from the mother superior to seek the advice of a psychologist. My request was given approval, because both the mother superior and her council saw that I was not performing at my best, and they wanted in every way possible to keep me within the community.

The psychologist confirmed my earlier convictions that religious life had produced many conflicts and contradictions within its system. On the one hand, it demonstrated to the world that its members and its services were dedicated to serving God above everything else, but on the other hand, it was not meeting the needs of its members or the world at large. If I could not surrender to comply with the community's rules, I should think about leaving. How frustrated I was! I felt that I was taking back from God a life that, in the beginning, I had so willingly committed to Him. I was facing an identify crisis. I had entered into my vocation with a depth of sincerity and love for God, and I had possessed a genuine desire to accomplish that which I had understood to be a divine call. Yet, the voids in my life needed to filled with some spiritual insights I was not receiving.

My faith in Catholicism remained genuine and undaunted, even though many others were questioning the validity of a system which had been looked upon as sacred and unchangeable over the years. Fortunately, I realized that I was dealing with a quite "human" institution that was coming to grips with problems of sudden liberal-mindedness. Many who were questioning the church's structure were becoming uncertain of their long-established aims and goals and of their spiritual authority. They wanted some drastic changes made within the church. I was not out to change the institution, but rather to find myself—and God's will for my life.

After a year of much prayer and self-introspection, I finally decided to leave the community, feeling that I had weighed my decision from every angle and had considered every alternative.

I had become convinced that neither I, the community, nor God was the recipient of my best efforts.

I then confided to my parents my intention to leave. My father, having been through the same situation, wanted to know whether or not I had sought the advice of a priest, and whether I had done some serious praying about the matter. He knew these actions were the requirements for the dispensations from final vows in Canon Law. I had done both! My mother conveyed to me her happiness,

for she had known for many years (as mothers often do), the conflicts I had gone through. We discussed them often on my short visits home. She was glad that they were finally coming to an end, although she never encouraged me to give up my commitment to God.

My preparations for departure went smoothly. I called the mother superior and applied for a dispensation from my vows. Both she and the council had been concerned over my welfare, and they were very upset over my final decision. I told them that I would not leave immediately, but rather that I would fulfill the responsibilities which I had been assigned for that school year. Several days later, I received the kindest letter from the mother superior, thanking me for all the years service I had given to the community and expressing the hope that I would find the happiness for which I was searching.

I wrote to several public school boards of education in the greater Washington, DC area. I chose this area because I had planned to live with my brother until I was financially independent. My brother had been with the Divine Word Missionaries from Conesus, New York, for eleven years. He knew what it was like to readjust to the secular world.

I received encouraging letters from each place to which I had applied. Through the generosity of a brother-in-law and my dear father, I was able to drive to Washington for a personal interview. I returned to the mission to which I had been assigned for that school year with a new job, a new school, and a new life ahead of me.

At the age of thirty-two, after spending three years in a preparatory school and sixteen years in service to the community, I left my past behind me as I left the mission. The

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three nuns who had been assigned under me in this small mission were exceedingly kind and loving in their response to me upon my departure. What a contradiction I felt at that moment! Only now, at the time of my departure did I feel the genuine love and affection I had found missing all those years in convent life. They wished me happiness and wanted to keep in contact with me. I remember their writing to later and telling me that the person assigned to take my place had to go to the local parish priest to tell him of my departure. I was told that the priest was in a state of shock when he learned the news. He had conveyed earlier to many of his priest friends how fortunate he was to have a talented, dedicated and old-fashioned nun direct his mission. He had especially liked the choir I had trained, and he wondered sadly how they would manage without me.

A year after I left the community, I received my "Indult of Secularization" from Rome and was required to return to the motherhouse in Baden, Pennsylvania for the signing of this document. My signature on this piece of paper from the Vatican

released the community of any obligation they had towards me, and also released me from any obligation to them. It was like getting a divorce!

Because of the blessings I had received from the community as I departed, my initial adjustment was an easy one, though after nineteen years I was being introduced to a life for which I was totally unprepared, being ignorant of its standards. With the two-hundred dollars the community had given me, I was able to purchase the ordinary things I needed to survive.

My initial experience of the taste of freedom was most refreshing! I just wanted to feel alive! I wanted to put my fingers into everything that could be productive within me. I wanted to expose myself to every experience available, especially socially. Predictably, my first involvement was that of becoming active in the Roman Catholic Church's Confraternity of Christian Doctrine program in Laurel, Maryland, where I had decided to reside. After three years as a volunteer teacher for the CCD program I was hired to coordinate this religious education program. I was responsible for some three hundred public school student's religious training and the thirty-five teachers who were trained by me to give them the instruction they needed in Catholicism.

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As productive as I was in this position, I still did not feel fulfilled. I was finding myself in the same situation I had left—stifled and spiritually starved. So, through the friendship of another member of the Roman Catholic Church, I was introduced to, and became a member of the Federated Women's Club. Hoping to use this as a means of becoming fulfilled, I became active in the political and social workings of the community and eventually became the club's president—the only single woman ever to hold this office. As president, I became involved in the state organization, both socially and politically. On the side, I also became involved in sewing clothes for a group of soldiers at a local army base, hoping to use this opportunity to learn how to associate with men. I was fortunate to be able to continue using my talents as a musician, giving private piano lessons to people I had befriended and their children. I was also privileged to have the opportunity to travel, learning the trade and operations of a tour director with Continental Trailways during my summer vacations from teaching school. Through the urgings of my father, I saved my money and was able to purchase property and invest in a home.

I found that people liked me, and I made many friends. I was being complimented on my personal appearance, my taste in clothing, and the forthrightness with which I established viewpoints concerning world affairs. Emotionally and psychologically, however, I was still decidedly immature. This was reflected in my dealings with the opposite sex. I was walking through a forest that was entangled with many deceitful and wrong directions, as I became immersed in the humanistic values of society. However, deep within my soul, I still had a constant desire to know and love a God to whom I had given my entire youth and young adulthood.

How did I discover God? Through the urging of a teacher friend, I sought counseling in adjusting to a world where I had encountered a different set of moral and ethical standards. Because of my over protected life, I had found it difficult to identify with a society where anything was acceptable, and I was not fitting into their mold. However, I knew in my soul that I would be held accountable before God one day, and I wasn't accepting His way of life either. I needed some guidance and direction through the forest of my sins that had developed in my life following the departure from the convent.

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After years of dating various types of men, I had become emotionally involved with a married man. Not realizing my vulnerability, I had made myself available and lent a sympathetic ear to him. He had told me his marital problems and frustrations. I had become acquainted with him through his being the father of one of my former students. At the time I met him, I was directing the religious education program of the Roman Catholic Church, and the priest who was coordinating the program with me was dating a teacher friend of mine. Conflicts? Many! Confusion? In abundance! Guilt? Overwhelming! There was so much sin in my life! Who was I? Where was I going? Where would I end up?

A teacher friend with whom I had sought consolation encouraged me to seek the advice and counsel of a friend of hers who happened to be a preacher of the Gospel. However, he was a minister of another faith, and I had always been taught that salvation and direction could only be found in and through the Roman Catholic Church. Yet, deep within my soul, I felt an urge to seek out the advice of this man. I had recognized that my anxieties had become acute, and I knew that I was on the verge of spiritual and physical suicide. I decided to seek the advice and help of anyone at this point. My friend arranged a meeting for the very next day.

Upon my entering his study, Paul Coffman greeted me warmly; he told me to sit down and asked whether he could be of help in any way. I told him of my problems, my anxieties, and the dream I had had that I believed could never be fulfilled. I will never forget the moment he opened the Bible on his desk and said, "Joanne, the answers to all of your problems and anxieties are here in God's Word. It tells you who you are, where you are going, and how you will achieve this." I was dumbfounded! No one throughout my entire religious life had ever shown me this direction.

As religious, I was encouraged to read the Bible to acquire spiritual indulgences. I was never permitted individual interpretation of it. In fact, as a novice in the novitiate, I was told to put a Bible under my mattress. The philosophy behind this instruction was that the Bible would ward off any demons that might cause me temptation during the night. The Bible was to be interpreted by those in authority. Scriptural passages were read

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during the Mass from elaborately designed Bibles that were available only to the priests on the altar. Any in-depth studies of their contents were pursued only by the clergy. I had taught religion and had studied theology for years, but I had never studied God's Word for the direction I needed in my life. I was totally ignorant that the Bible could open a whole new vista for a closer walk with God.

As we proceeded into the counseling session, I was impressed with how sensitive and observant the man was. He was able to identify the symptoms of my major problem. He saw a person who felt a total loss and rejection. It was at this point that he began dealing with pointing me in the direction of building my self-worth and self-esteem. Because of his many years of counseling lost souls, he could sense and recognize my need for acceptance, affection and approval. His starting point was to deal with some of those basic needs and the job of life itself! My emotions had mirrored my need for positive change. My sense of worthlessness had fostered insecurity and futility with my life. My low self-regard had made any errors appear colossal. Thus, focusing on my failure and shortcomings, I was not accepting God's forgiveness, and I felt totally defeated by an undermining sense of guilt. My defense mechanism was manipulation. I thought I could even manipulate God!

So many of my experiences had been negative; now I needed and wanted some positive truths about myself. Unable to forgive myself for the past, I could not forgive others; being guilty, I could not love. I had felt too empty of self-love to **give** love and too unworthy of self-love to **accept** love.

Week after week, for a period of six months, I was to learn and internalize that my self-love was based on five facts:

1. **God created me.** I was shown Genesis 1:27, 31 which reads, "God created man in His own image ... and indeed it was very good."
2. **God loves me.** In John 3:16, I read, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."
3. **God Planned for me.** Psalm 139:16 reads, "Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed."

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4. **God gifted me.** The apostle Paul writes, "But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift" (Ephesians 4:7).
5. **Christ died for me,** and gave me value. In II Corinthians 5:15, 21, the apostle Paul wrote, "And he died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again ... For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

I had been doubting not myself, but God. If Jesus Christ considered me worth dying for, then His investment in me was priceless and provided me with membership in His family, as well as freedom from sin, guilt and fear, and an escape from emptiness and a wasted life. Most of all He provided me with **His** forgiveness! Convinced that God had endowed me with such great worth and had forgiven me, I could forgive myself. Because He had accepted me, I could accept myself. Yes, God had valued me highly, and I could now value myself greater than ever before! I was now beginning to visualize God's plan for me! He loved me so, this I believed! He died for me that I might have forgiveness before His father in Heaven; of this I was convinced! Now the question remained—what was I going to do for Him in return for all these blessings?

Throughout the counseling sessions, I became more and more intrigued with Paul's knowledge of the Bible. I knew I was vulnerable, and I feared that this man would subtly coerce me into accepting his religious beliefs. I was too loyal to my Roman Catholic faith to want to jeopardize my convictions to or be deceived in any way. I had not sought help to find a new religion, but rather to find myself.

In any event, I believed the Bible to be the revealed and inspired word of God; and I was shown that there was an intellectual basis for faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. The scriptural evidence was apparent. I believed that God created man with the ability to think, to acquire knowledge, and to discern truth. Although I tried hard to confuse this man theologically, Paul Coffman was able to make every defense scripturally for the hope that was within him. Because of his forthrightness in presenting me with the truth, I began to discover the Bible as a great source of guidance, strength and faith.

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In this new-found faith that I was developing, I was confronted with Biblical truths from which I could not escape. I was finding many truths in the scriptures that were not taught in Roman Catholicism. I was finding contradictions between what I had been taught and what I was discovering in reading God's Word. This conflict caused me much torment and anguish. My doubts concerning my religious heritage were becoming exceedingly great. I was a Roman Catholic! On the one hand, I had worshipped God with my heart and my emotions; but on the other, I realized that I had never had the kind of personal relationship with Him that He asked and demanded of me. I believed that I was a sinner, and I longed for forgiveness; but I was still plagued with my doubts and guilt. I was not completely ready to surrender my life to God.

One day while reading Philippians 3:13-14, the words seemed to jump off the page as I read, "... forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." "God was willing to forgive and forget my past; I must do the same," I said to myself. I then began to visualize more vividly the completion of my goal and God's goal for me. I was excited about pursuing my salvation! I prayed for God's wisdom and guidance.

Confused about the traditions that had become acceptable as a way of guidance in the Roman Catholic Church, I came upon a passage in the book of Mark. Jesus spoke boldly on how He saw people erroneously observing traditions as a source of divine guidance and information for mankind. He said, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. ... making the word of God of no effect through your tradition, which you have handed down. And many such things you do" (Mark 7:9-13). And in Matthew 15:9, Jesus said, "And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."

God says that when men mingle human traditions with the commands of God and presume to act on the authority of God, their efforts are in vain. He will not allow his law to be mixed and adulterated with human traditions. Nothing could have been more explicit than that fact in the advice and warning contained in both of these passages of scripture.

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My plan for salvation was becoming effective; my life was beginning to take on a spiritual genesis. I had been faced with many inconsistencies and contradictions since the Roman Catholic Church had begun its Second Vatican Council. My spiritual vision had become obscured by the complexities of traditions and myths by which I had allowed myself to become enslaved.

In my eager pursuit of Biblical knowledge, I saw unfold a story in the Bible of man's continual failure and God's unwearied grace, the story of man's misuse of all that God had given him. That story is emphasized again and again that God had planned something for my life and a continuation of that life—a glorious future with Him, in which all ills could be remedied, all evil banished, and all sorrows forgotten. The whole unhappy list of man's limitations would be restored to a perfect state in eternity for me if I surrendered my life completely to His way. Who could deliver God's message more accurately than His Son Jesus, when He said in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." There was no other way by which I could enter God's Kingdom—not through Mary, the saints, the Roman Catholic Church or any good work I could do. Jesus Christ equals salvation!

God had intended the spiritual to have control over my life, and He never intended for me to face the stresses of life without Him. I knew one day I would have to give an account for all that I believed in and patterned my life after. I knew that there was one other than Jesus and no name under heaven other than His whereby I could be saved. Then I read in Romans 12:2 the apostle Paul's warning, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

I had no alternative. I knew now that my only salvation would consist in accepting the truths that were revealed to me through the Gospels. I could no longer remain in Roman Catholicism, for I could not continue serving two masters. I could not honor the traditions of Roman Catholicism and still remain faithful to the

commitment I would make in accepting God's Word as my guide for my eternal salvation.

After thirty-six years of wanting to fulfill the dream of serving God in the greatest capacity available, I would at last be able to

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serve Him by accepting **His** Way of salvation and **His** truths for inner peace and happiness. After many long hours of prayer and intelligent consideration of the facts and truths presented to me, I surrendered my life to Jesus once and for all on October 4, 1972 and became immersed in the waters of baptism as an act of obedience to the command of Jesus when He told Nicodemus in John 3:3, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." In Mark 16:16, Jesus also says, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he who does not believe will be condemned." I shall never forget this occasion. Despite all the public and private presentations I had made in witnessing to others my choice of religious convictions and consecration, this surrender of my life to God's will and His alone, climaxed my complete dedication to God, to whom I had made a commitment at the age of six.

Looking back to the moment when I accepted God's saving grace and received my salvation, I pondered how it all began. I remembered having been asked the most important questions of my life, "Joanne, are you saved?" "Are you sure that you will go to Heaven when you die?" It is not: are you a member of a church, or how good you are, but are you saved? Have you accepted God's plan for your salvation? Stunned, and like the Philippian jailer, who had asked Paul and Silas about his salvation in Acts 16:31, I too wanted to know what I had to do to be saved, for I thought that had been taken care of when I had been baptized as an infant. Paul and Silas' answer in Act was, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." I pondered this heavily.

As an infant, I could not have believed for I had not arrived at the state mentally in which I could have made this confession. Someone else had committed my life to God, as I would discover as I grew in the knowledge of Catholicism. I believed that I was a sinner; my conscience had convicted me of this. The Apostle Paul emphasizes man's sinful nature when he says: "There is none righteous, no, not one. ... For there is no difference; for **all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:10-23).

I knew that when sin entered the world through Adam and Eve, the penalty God pronounced upon them and all mankind was death. Paul says it this way in Romans 5:12: "Therefore, just as

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through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men because **all** sinned."

Adam and Eve were doomed to experience not only physical death as they were driven from the Garden of Eden, but also spiritual death. They were separated from the blessings of God, and this separation resulted in eternal death and separation from God in eternity. I realized that I did not inherit the sins of Adam and Eve or the guilt of their sins, but I would have to suffer the consequences of their sin and the condemnation that comes as a result of sin.

Blood was necessary for the remission of sin, as stated in Hebrews 9:19-21. Jesus poured out His blood and died that all might have remission of their sins. This was the good news as I considered what Jesus had done for me and the predicament that I was in as a sinner before almighty God!

Outside of Christ and a right relationship with God, I could have no true peace or genuine happiness. "And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (I John 5:11-12). I could do nothing, absolutely nothing, to earn my salvation. In Matthew 7:21, Jesus says: "Not everyone that says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.' "

I had come to the point in my life when I realized I needed to walk in newness of life. I needed to repent of my sins. I was sorry for my sins and my past life; and most of all, I was sorry that Jesus had to die on the cross for my sins, which were mine and mine alone! I was willing to surrender my total life to God, my mind, my heart and my will—not only as "a living sacrifice" to God but also as a grateful response to Jesus, "who paid it all!"

Confessing openly my profession and my desire to be born again as was spoken of in I Timothy 6:12. and the Ethiopian nobleman did in Acts 8:37, I awaited the moment when I would die to my past with Christ as I was buried with Him in the waters of baptism, and I would arise a new creature. Baptism was the transitional point that stood between my old life and the

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new life I would have in Jesus. Faith started the salvation process; the power of the Word of God took hold of my mind and began to change my thinking and purpose of life. Finally, baptism changed my relationship with Christ and allowed me the right of eternal happiness with God.

Jesus called himself the "Good Shepherd." He watches carefully over His flock. We are His sheep—blundering, straying, often falling into the pits, yet He is always there to pull us out. He said that He knows His sheep. Jesus tells us, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:27-28).

I was so unworthy, for it was only by the grace of God through faith that I was saved, and not of myself or any work I had performed. It was purely a gift from God.

I am no longer concerned about man's interpretation as to my choice of commitment religiously, and his dictates as to the way my life should be lived, for Jesus said in Mark 10:29-31, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life!"

One of the most beautiful joys I have experienced as a Christian is that now I have a home and a family who share with me the joys and sorrows of life, in the Spirit of the Lord. I constantly enjoy the fellowship of other Christians who, like myself, are sinners, saved by grace, but rise daily above the standards of this materialistic world and evidence Christ among their fellow me. Each time I assemble with them, they remind me of the early Christians, about whom others went about saying, "See how they love one another!" Christ is now my real reason for living, my armor that I put on daily against the darts of Satan as I venture into the battlefield of life faced with all the temptations of the flesh.

In Galatians 2:20, I testify with Paul that "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and

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the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me!"

Daily, I open my heart and my mind to God's Word. I find my hope and strength in the assurance God has given me in His inspired Word as I stand on His promises. I have discovered that the Christian life is not a bed of roses, for my troubles did not cease the moment I accepted Christ and He added me to His church (Acts 2:47). In certain ways, my troubles have increased because of the responsibilities I have committed myself to in becoming a Christian. The great difference now is I have Jesus, who has all the answers for me in His Word. God in His grace has provided for me complete and full salvation in His Son.

In searching desperately for answers to the questions, "Who am I? Where am I going? and How will I get there?" I have found a treasure I never dreamed was available, the words of eternal life through the Bible. I have found the "real" Jesus, who cared enough for me to remove me from the mental and spiritual slavery that had bound me to fears of guilt, doubt and excommunication. As a former Roman Catholic, God prepared me for the **master plan** of my life and groomed me in my youth and young adulthood for the great commission He gave to the apostles and has extended to **all** Christians when He said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the

Holy Spirit teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

I learned discipline well as a nun, and now I use it to great advantage in my prayer life and in meditating and studying God's Word. I perform these devotional acts daily for a period of a half-hour in preparation for the work God will give me that day in leading other souls to Him through my example and the words of encouragement I will share with them that Jesus shared with me.

My stewardship comes easy because of my vow of poverty when as a nun I had no worldly wealth, and all that I receive now I realize is on loan to me from the God. God has blessed me abundantly. He has taken care of all my needs. Jesus Christ is the Savior of my soul and the Lord of my life. My vow of

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chastity taught me the principles of intimacy with Him, and I have no other God before me. And the tape of my life is now rewound spiritually and, although very fine instruments may be able to pick up the recordings of my thinking and actions that are, and perhaps will always be, a part of my Roman Catholic heritage, I pray daily that the blood of Jesus and my growth in the knowledge and wisdom of God's Word will shine through my life and be the beckoning call that will lead others to Christ and strengthen those in the brotherhood.

In this testimony, I give all the honor and praise and glory to God alone, who, out of His abundant love for me, allowed me to wander in the desert for thirty-six years, as the Israelites did for a period of forty years. But no He has brought me to the sheltering fold of His divine love. If this testimony has touched your heart, and should you realize your need for Christ's salvation from sin, as I did, will you call upon Him? He assures us, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out" (John 6:37).

Remember that He is the only answer to your soul's need for spiritual nourishment and abundant life. Remember, too, that the devil will do everything within his power, and put up every roadblock conceivable, to distract and prevent you from learning the truth in God/s Word. The Word of God is the only balm that can heal the wounds of a lost soul, and give man eternal salvation. God wishes that no man should perish, but have life and have it more abundantly.

I leave you with this question, "If you were standing before the Lord right at this moment would you know for certain whether you are saved based on the **Word of God?**"

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