

An Interview gone Bad

By John Roy

Recently I received a call from a man. This the way the conversation began. “Are you Rev. Roy?” “Yes, I am. Although no one calls me Rev. Roy anymore, John will be fine.” “John, we’re looking for a preacher are you interested?” “Well sir, I’m quiet happy at Pelham Road but I’ve learned to at least answer the door to see if God is knocking. Would you tell me more about your church.” The stranger answered, “Well, like I said we are in need of a preacher, would you like to sit down with me.” “Sure, but I’m making no promise, I like Pelham Road and I’m not sure God is in this.”

He went on to invite me up to Travelers Rest for lunch with him at the Pizza Inn. It was an interesting conversation and I’d like to share it with you. His name was Jim. He told me he’d sit in his truck until I arrived and that’s how I would know him. He drove a bright red 1977 Chevy Silverado. His tag was AIM4GOD. He was in his early 70’s. He was about 6’3, he looked a little like Andy Griffith with thick red hair. He smelled like my dad, a mixture of Old Spice and Half and Half pipe tobacco. He was wearing a pair of black jeans held up by a belt buckle the size of Texas. Burned into the leather belt was the scripture, “Blessed is the man who does not take the wicked as a guide . . . the law of the Lord is his delight.” (Psalm 1:1). His hand shake was like a vice.

Jim wasn’t much on small talk. He didn’t seem to care much about if I was married or if I had children. He wasn’t interested in my resume or education.

After we met we went in and found a seat. When our tea arrived he was ready to commence. "John we are looking for a preacher." Again I asked for him to tell me more about the church. You've heard of people who have no tack, Jim is their president. "What does it matter what kind of church we are, we are in need of a preacher, we need to hear from God, are you willing to do it or not, it's a simple question." As you can imagine I am use to a little more nuance. I'm not prepared for such straight forward talk, but now I was confused. I did not know if he was talking about a pastorate or just a chance to preach. As I sat there awkwardly using my mouth being full as a cover to think of something to say, Jim started again. "Preacher John we want to hear the truth. We need somebody to tell us the truth. You ain't one of those lying preachers." As I washed down my pizza with tea I said, "Now Jim, us preachers have heard this all our lives. People say they want to hear the truth but when we start telling the truth they show us the door. Or worse a cross." Jim got a little aggravated with that remark. It has been my experience that people who don't have any tact, often can't handle it when you respond in kind. So I saw an opportunity to press the issue, after all I was happy at Pelham Road I wasn't wanting to leave so now I'm going to tell Jim what he wants the unvarnished truth. "Jim your people don't want the truth, you don't want the truth, you want a preacher to justify your feelings about life, faith, and politics in the name of God. That's not truth-----that's therapy and that's what most churches want." Jim responded with, "Now we are getting somewhere---- you sound a bit angry. I bet you couldn't tell the truth if you had to. You've been preaching what . . . twenty or thirty years and I bet you've water it down so much nobody getting drunk on your preaching because there is more water than substance in it." I barked back, "Now Jim you are ruining my appetite." Jim said,

“I bet I am.” I interrupted, “Jim I think I tell the truth regularly.” Jim had more to say, “Preacher I’ve seen your kind, you tell the truth but not all the truth, you raise your voice but avoid controversy, your kind of preaching is one part truth and third parts massage. You’re a minister, a doctor, a pastor, in a world starving for meat you make pastries. We need a preacher; a truth teller. I can see you’re not what we need. And by the way I bet in your world your parishioners pick up the check, they’d buy you this meal, it’s their gift for your weekly massage but I want you to know I ain’t paying for your meal. Your preaching is like this pizza, more cold than hot, it quenches your hunger but it provides no nourishment.” Jim had said his peace and he was headed to the cashier. I was angry for the first time in a long time. As Jesus was when he threw the money changers to the curb at the Temple, I was hot. I’m not sure if I was as justified as Jesus but it was clear I was angry. I was angry enough that I didn’t even bother with getting my change from the cashier. I gave her \$20 for an \$8 meal and was on Jim’s heels.

When your angry you don’t always think clearly. So I was having a hard time forming a comeback for Jim’s accusation. I’ve never been real quick on my feet with witty comebacks. Something had to be said, if Jim left the parking lot I would never have my say. To stall I walked over to the passenger side of his truck and jumped in. I figured the last thing he wanted was to take me home with him, I figured wrong. He fired the Silverado up and we were on our way. I said, “Now wait a minute Jim I’ve been living with schizophrenic Christians like yourself for my entire ministry, you say you want the truth but you only want what you think is the truth.” “That’s where your wrong,” Jim interrupted, “I want . . . I need to hear the truth about Hell and I bet hell’s not even in your vocabulary.” Jim unknowingly was getting into deep water with someone taller than himself. “Jim,

I'll tell you the truth about Hell. Jesus talks more about money than Hell. Jesus rarely refers to Hell but money is his chief topic. Even when he tells a story like the Rich Man and Lazarus the story's not about Hell, it's about ignoring others while you keep piling up your fortune." Jim couldn't hold his tongue, he slammed on the brakes for the red light and jumped in, "I don't know where you get this stuff but that's the exact foolishness I'm talking about, you've watered down the truth for so long, your serving water and calling it tea." "Jim," I shot back, "facts are stubborn, Hell is mentioned 23 times in the New Testament, 11 times it is a translation of *hades* which means grave, like in Revelation 1, *'I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell (grave) and of death.* Then 12 times it is a translation of *gehenna* which is an actual valley on the southwest corner of Jerusalem which was used as a garbage dump site. The point is 23 times it is translated 'hell' those usages refer to the grave or a dump, at it's best it's mention 23 times. Money however, is referenced, illustrated, or spoken of by Jesus 65 times. That's the truth. You don't want to hear the truth----Jesus talks more about how you use your money than Hell."

By this time we are up near Marrieta and I'm thinking I may have won the battle but I was losing the war, where are we going. "I said Jim there's no need for you to take me back to Pizza Inn just drop me here and I'll walk back." I wasn't scared but I had said my peace and proved my point and was ready to return home. That's when Jim said, "You amaze me, you twist it all around----You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. The Bible warns us about people like you, you are an ear tickler---you say what people want to hear." I interrupted, "Now Jim, your evidence to the contrary---you WANT me to preach about hell and Jesus wants me to preach about money, I'm saying what you **don't want to hear.**"

“That’s right,” he said, “your saying lies and people don’t want to hear lies they want to hear the truth.” “Your making my point Jim, nobody wants to hear the truth-----

Jim pulled off onto a gravel road and stopped, so I checked my phone, sure enough no cell service. Jim said, “You’ll need to get out of here, but before you go, let me tell you something. The other Sunday I was sick so I stayed home from church and caught some of your kind on television.” I hated to be lumped in with television evangelist but I did not rock the boat. Only when the truck came to a stop did I notice the shotgun hanging behind my head. Jim continued, “One guy was preaching about how money is a seed gift, that the Lord will give me \$100 if I give him \$10 what kind of nonsense is that? Then on another station this man was going on and on about a Greek word for love, as if anyone cares about the origin of the word. Later I wandered on to a story about creation on the Discover channel. There espousing the Bible teaches two creation stories which have conflicting information. Here in one afternoon is the problem with Christianity in America. One wants our money, the other wants to show how educated he is, and the rest want to undermine the Bible.” “So,” I interrupted, “Jim you think we are on the road to ruin, when it comes to faith.” “Absolutely and it’s all because you’re a minister and not a preacher. You pastors are afraid to tell the truth because you’ll afraid the folks will vote with their feet and leave you vulnerable, holding a mortgage.”

By now my anger was under control and I was actually growing pastoral toward Jim. “Jim what do you think the truth is about family values is from the Bible.” “Well, the truth is one man for one woman for all time, now even I know divorce

happens but the idea should be one man for one woman forever. A man is the head of the house, the Bible says that a woman should be silent and learn from her husband. Part of the problem is that we have left God's sweet ladies without good Godly leadership." I had to say something, "Jim I don't want to agitate you anymore but you've been reading from the James Dobson bible. I wish the Bible supported the values of family you have, but either you have not heard Jesus or you ignore him. In Luke 14 Jesus said, *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple."* Does that sound like a Norman Rockwell painting." Jim answered, "Of course not but that's not what Jesus means, he doesn't mean hate your family." I interrupted him and said, "Who's massaging the Bible now." Jim's face was fire engine red, but I pressed my luck in spite of the shotgun. "Jim read the Bible, *Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."* "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, *"Here are my mother and my brothers!"*³⁵ *Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.* With Jesus, Jim, family is not about blood or marriage or even divorce it's about "doing the father's will." Jim couldn't let that pass, "Are you saying people should not be married and men are not the head of the house?" Jim, I'm saying the Bible is a challenging book and the truth is not what you have heard the **most**, it is not what is on the radio or what your favorite preacher believes, the truth is buried and without moving a little dirt you'll continue to believe the only thing about marriage which is important is that you do it only once."

Jim was not one for silence neither was he one familiar with someone quoting the Bible to him. “John” he began almost in a whisper, “I think you know the Bible but I’m not sure you believe it. You know even the devil can quote scripture. You know in the Bible it is written *Wives submit to your own husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.* John either you are ignorant of the bible or you read it but don’t believe it.”

I responded, “Jim you make a good point but your point is dangerous and you don’t even know it. I’m sure you are a good man and the world is a better place because you are here. You’re not part of the problem. I’m sure you are devoted to your wife and family and you seem to be the type of man who would never steal from another. You have earned every penny you have. So don’t confuse what I am about to say with who you are. You started all this with wanting the truth and I’m not sure I am mean enough to tell you the truth but here it is.” I took a deep breath and put my hand on the door handle. “*You are a fraud. You pay your tithe and that’s all, you neglect the weightier matters of the scripture---justice, mercy, and faith. These are the things you should add to the others. You filter out the mosquito and swallow the camel. You clean the outside of the cup while the inside is full of greed. You are like a whitewashed tomb, you look good on the outside but the inside it is rotten.*” Jim’s answer was memorable, “You are mean enough, but you continue to be wrong. Scripture is true and that’s what I want to hear

that's what we all need to hear. Your ilk don't preach truth---you are more like the scribes than me. John you don't take scripture to mean what it says, like earlier when the scripture says a wife should submit to her husband I saw your face----- you don't tell the folks the truth you concentrate on the verse before about everybody mutually submitting and make it out that marriage is some sort of partnership where the wife needs to respect the husband but not submit to his authority . . . am I right." My answer was, "Jim you are right about me but wrong about the bible."

"Jim back at Pizza Inn there was a woman in the buffet line in front of you, do you remember. "Yes, but what's this about." "You know what it is about she had on a tight pair of jeans and I watched your eyes, you looked directly at her butt and there was no pizza on her hips." Jim became defensive, "So your saying I was staring at her." I said, "Staring is what we do in an art gallery what you were doing is lingering." Jim defended himself, "I'm not sure I would go that far but Ill' admit my eyes went where they shouldn't have." I said, "Well Jim if we are going to believe the bible is literally true, which I believe is your desire, because you want wives to submit to their husbands then you need to pluck your eye out. Because Mark 9:47 is as inspired as Ephesians "If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Should I get the clipper out of the truck bed or can you pluck your eye out yourself." Jim said, "Now you want to be a literalist." I said, "No Jim, I don't want you to be a literalist, I want you to take the Bible seriously and be consistent, you can't read the Bible literally in Ephesians and ignore Mark and Leviticus where it is written, "stone disobedient children."

Jim was either getting frustrated or hungry because we really had not eaten much at Pizza Inn. He said in a frustrated tone, "John the Bible is the truth and we want the truth and there is nothing you can say to convince me otherwise. My problem is I don't practice the Bible, I should pluck my eye out but I don't, I should turn the other cheek, but I don't. Yet I believe it." "Jim," I said, "I also believe the bible is the truth, yet the truth is harder to discern than you might imagine. I preach the truth and it may not be what you believe but your disagreement with me does not make the bible any less the truth. I need to start walking if I going to get back home before dinner. But Jim you can have the last word." Jim was ready, "I've been looking for a preacher for a long time. I don't know what happen to the 'Hell preachin', corn shucking, truth telling, God fearin' preachers we once had but I haven't heard one in a long time." And that was it.

I kept my word, I let Jim have the final word. I got out of the truck and started walking. As I walked back to Travelers Rest I had a lot to think about. So much to sort through that this sermon could not do it justice. It's obvious Jim and I see things differently.

Nothing or no one is one dimensional. Preachers are not massage therapist, although we do try to heal and not hurt. And Jim is not a narrowed minded, simpleton, although he wants to act as if there is only one way; his. Yet the truth about people is as challenging as the truth about scripture. There are many layers to discover to each.

It was a long walk back to the Pizza Inn and Jim had a point. My problem and his problem is we don't practice the Bible we do understand. That's the problem, your problem and my problem we don't practice the Bible. The hardest truth to swallow, the one we all know to be true is that we all talk much bigger than we live. So maybe we shouldn't worry too much about what we don't understand about the bible or our faith until we practice regularly what we do understand.

It's not that the bible has been tried and found false it is that the bible has been tried and found difficult.