

What People are Saying About **Living the Dream?**

“In *Living the Dream?*, Tristan Sherwin takes aim at three 'E's'—Empire Building, Escapist, and Exhibitionist Christian thinking. But instead of just critiquing and deconstructing them, he imagines a better way forward. With incisive clarity and creative storytelling, he presents to us a prophetic Jesus, a welcoming Table, and a divine Artist who is making a masterpiece out of this broken world. Care about the future of the faith? Need fresh vision for what's to come? Drop everything and read this book!”

—**Zach Hoag**, author of *The Light is Winning: Why Religion Just Might Bring Us Back to Life*

“Reading *Living the Dream?* called to mind a line from Bob Dylan’s *All Along The Watchtower* — “So let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late.” In his latest book, Tristan Sherwin does not talk falsely — he writes with boldness, conviction, and urgency. Sherwin has climbed into a watchtower, seen the gathering threats posed by Escapism, Exhibitionism, and Empire, and has sounded an alarm. For Christianity to have a credible witness to Christ in the 21st century, it needs to embrace the kind of robust and beautiful vision Sherwin sets forth in *Living the Dream?* I find hope in such prophetic voices.”

—**Brian Zahnd**, Pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri; author of *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*

“We humans have an unending propensity to find our security and value everywhere but Christ. As such, it has always been necessary for the church to become aware of how the idols of its age are drawing it away from its mission. In this compelling book, Sherwin raises a prophetic voice inviting us to see how we have become enamoured by idols in our own time. We’ve substituted an embodied faith that makes a difference in this present world for spiritual escapism. We’ve traded the power of Christ’s love and humility for power rooted in influence, celebrity, and politics. We’ve giddily taken over the Spirit’s task of judgement, evaluating everyone around us, narrowing the definition of the Gospel until we are clear about who is in and who is out, with our own hand comfortably guarding the gate. The resulting brand of Christianity feels obvious and familiar to us, but it has so little in common with the vibrant faith and practice of Jesus’ first followers. With honesty, vulnerability, and thoughtful theological reflection, Sherwin invites us to hear again the voice that animated those first Christians—we can be a part of the community that incarnates Jesus, participating in God’s masterwork of restoration that is truly good news for all humanity and, indeed, for the whole cosmos. This is a message the church in our age desperately needs.”

—Marc Alan Schelske, Teaching Elder of Bridge City Community Church in Milwaukie, Oregon; author of *The Wisdom of Your Heart: Discovering the God-given Purpose and Power of Your Emotions*.

“You won’t agree with everything you read in Tristan’s newest book. If you do, you have probably not read it closely enough. Tristan speaks from a prophetic posture, lighting a fire that will both purify and, hopefully, ignite a more truthful way of being in those who read it. The book is written by Tristan, a Pentecostal, and it clearly speaks to his tribe. But the book clearly speaks to those of us who live and move in other tribes too. Tristan puts his finger on aspects of western culture that make the church ill and calls us to remedy this situation. I recommend reading and digesting his words. I pray the book would challenge and inspire you as it did for me.”

—**Fr. Ryan Cook, DipCm, MTS, Doctoral Candidate. Anglican Priest, Vancouver, Canada**

“Tristan Sherwin, my good friend and fellow-worker, has one of the sharpest minds I know. He reads voraciously and widely, delights in theological discussion, and is an excellent Bible teacher and family man. Despite his dark days, he enjoys life; especially watching films and finding illustrations of deep spiritual truth in them. All this is brought to bear in *Living the Dream*?

Carefully crafted for ease of reading, this book is nevertheless no comfortable read and is born out of Tristan’s love for Christ and the Church He is building. With integrity, insight, extensive exposition and a touch of humour, Tristan explores the beauty of God’s nature and how His rule or kingdom functions to fulfil His eternal purpose. The book is worth its price for this alone. But he is concerned that the Church is being squeezed into a worldly mould, producing a counterfeit kingdom, a false gospel and fallacious worship that fails to mirror God’s image to that world. This is not just a polemic against pernicious praxis. Tristan points the way forward to recovery and renewal in Christ to fit us to effectively participate in God’s Dream for our chaos-ridden world. Read this book (and re-read it) and allow the Lord to kindle a fresh flame and vision in your heart.”

—**Bruce Millar, MTh, Pastor Emeritus and teacher at Metro Christian Centre, Bury, England.**

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To the memory of Tom Wedall,

With belated thanks for that one, brief conversation and for the gift
of a sentence that has prophetically haunted me throughout the years
of my pilgrimage with Christ: 'Never neglect the Resurrection!'

Tristan Sherwin

LIVING THE DREAM?

The Problem with Escapist,
Exhibitionist, Empire-Building
Christianity

Black  Coney

FOREWORD

The way believers work out their faith is always within a context. For, as persons, we are inevitably situated. We live positioned in time, in geography, in culture, influenced by prevailing moral and philosophical ideas. This does not mean, of course, that we are consciously aware of any of these. Far more often, the contours which shape our experience of life are seen to be ‘normal.’ Their values structure our society. They frame its laws, politics, and economics; they direct the curricula in our educational institutions. And they make it easy for each succeeding generation to see itself as more enlightened than the generations of its parents and grandparents.

Those of us who study history or philosophy, however, are conscious that such ‘normalization’ carries with it a false assumption of neutrality. It is dangerous to maintain that ‘we see things like this, because this is how they are.’ For are they? Familiarity often lulls us into accepting the very things we should be questioning. It prevents us from recognizing that undergirding the way societies think and act lie deep-seated world views which contain their own assumptions about human life, meaning, morality, truth and God.

This can even affect how we understand and relate to the Christian faith. Christianity itself offers us an authentic world view—a framework of meaning, from which we can begin to see the reality that surrounds us, in its wonderful depth and coherence. It is one we learn from the unfolding narrative of the Bible in the many varied forms of literature we find there. It is also one which finds its ultimate meaning in the New Testament revelation of Jesus the Christ, as the Incarnate Word of God. But all too often, competing, prevailing world views lodged solidly in our cultural mindset can intrude into the reading of the Bible and distort our understanding. We listen as opponents of Christianity fail to grasp its most fundamental concepts and parody the text, missing the point. We listen also as Christians attempt to justify very strange concepts or incongruences, because they believe God is asking them to believe these. And the clarity

and relevance of Christian truth for our own generation becomes blurred by confusion and misrepresentation.

So this book rightly recognizes and identifies many of the ‘isms’ that intrude into our interpretation of the truth God offers us. For, whether they be escapism, nationalism, materialism, exhibitionism, consumerism, individualism, militarism or a dozen others, their impact will leave us with a shrunken or unrecognizable Gospel, and affect our own faith lives. Corruptions of the Christian faith leave everyone impoverished. Yet in *Living the Dream?* Tristan Sherwin does more than offer us warnings. He invites us back into the living text of the Bible, so we can read it better. He tackles tricky passages, and articulates the many questions that people ask, engaging with them in an open, thoughtful way. He acknowledges an unfolding, progressive revelation and points to the Hebrew Scriptures as ‘a self-critical window on itself, (which) constantly refines and challenges its own views.’ He challenges misleading representations of God, especially those which describe a violent, vengeful autocratic deity. Instead, he points to the radical self-emptying love of Christ’s Cross as ‘the pattern through which the world is saved and reconciled.’

With theology woven through a mosaic of film, stories, family outings, and international news, we are reassured in our recognition that Christianity speaks into every area of our life and culture today. And this takes us inevitably from thinking about the Christian vision, into the question of how we should live it out in our own lives and relationships. No author can answer this question for us, however. The routes we take and the visions we embrace are our own responsibility before God. For some of us the path might be hard. Yet, whoever you are, and whatever turmoil you might have encountered, I believe that by the time you reach the final pages, you will be more conscious that a Christian way forward is a joyful challenge for any human being. And Christ’s love is available to every one of us to help us meet that challenge. For God’s kingdom will surely come closer in our own culture, when God’s Spirit lifts our human spirits and fills us with a deeper vision of God’s intent for the world.

— Elaine Storkey, author of *Scars Across Humanity*

oo | INTRODUCTION

I shoplifted a wristwatch eighteen months ago

In my defence, it *was* an accident. Honest! It had been a long day for us as a family, and the end of it found Steph and me floundering around a supermarket for what seemed like hours (it was probably twenty minutes, in retrospect). I was fatigued, and the kids were bouncing around and pestering for things in their end-of-the-day hyperactivity. Plus, my depression was causing me to have what I would call a ‘grey day’. So I wasn’t fully with it, so to speak.

I’m not making excuses. In hindsight, I can easily see where I went wrong. *I* had the handheld scanner, and I know that it was *my* task to scan every item we placed into the trolley. But for some unknown reason, after relenting to our youngest’s demands to spend his unearned Christmas money on a cheap wristwatch, I failed to do my duty. I just pushed the trolley towards him, he placed the watch inside, and then we all mooched over to the food section of the store, where we spent another twenty or so minutes. We then walked to the self-checkout tills, I transferred the data from the handheld scanner to the till, I paid, packed, and then drove home. Through all of this, *we* (not *I*, officer) were unaware of the felony that had taken place. I did—hand on heart—believe we had paid for every item in our possession.

It’s easily done. Although I’m not sure you’re totally convinced.

When we arrived home, though, it wasn’t long before the ugly, hideous truth of our misdemeanour revealed itself, as our son attempted to try on his new contraband.

Upon opening the packaging, we discovered that a plastic clasp on one of the watch straps had snapped beyond repair. So inevitably, like any good consumer who knows their rights, I went to the carrier bag to fish out the

receipt. We reuse our shopping bags, and I have a nasty habit of leaving all of the shopping receipts in the bottom of them. So I picked up what I thought was the latest receipt and combed through the itemised list, looking for the watch to make sure it was the correct one. Lo and behold, the watch wasn't on there, so I picked up another... and another... and another... until I had scrutinized all fifty of them. I then searched my coat pockets. And my trouser pockets. And then my wallet. No luck there, either.

As I paused to ponder this mystery, a gnawing doubt crept towards the forefront of my mind. I returned to the shopping bag and started going through the receipts again, this time looking at the dates, and that's when my suspicions were confirmed.

Instantly, the whole scene in the shop replayed in my head. I knew what I had done. I knew I hadn't scanned that cheap £7 watch. I could only confess: 'Steph, *we've* stolen a watch.'

I'll be honest with you. The thought of returning this broken watch to the store seemed like a huge waste of effort. They'd only throw it away, anyway, I reasoned. And it was cheaply made, I thought, so do we really want to get a replacement? Additionally, no one knew we had it. So why should I waste my time taking back something that no one knows I have, and that they'll only throw away upon return? I might as well throw it in my own bin and save all of us the hassle. But, in my attempts to be an honest person, I had to return the watch. And plus, my son still wanted a watch; he was distraught to discover that it was broken, and was "desperate" to replace it. So I had to return to the scene of our crime.

I decided I would take the watch back the next day. I would explain how I forgot to scan it, I'd then pay for the watch, and I'd get a replacement. No worries. I was sure they'd understand. I was sure they'd find the whole thing comical. I even imagined myself standing at the customer service desk, laughing with the store's clerk like we were old friends. What could go wrong?

Answer: Steph.

Or, to be more precise: Steph had just gotten a brainwave.

Steph's a bargain hunter, by the way, and like many, she hates the idea of wasting money on cheap 'tat'. She hadn't wanted to buy the watch in the first place, and now saw the broken watch as an opportunity to get something of better quality. So, while I was hunting through receipts, Steph—acting on the belief that we had paid for the watch and whilst seeking to comfort our heartbroken son—was busy searching online for a better deal than the broken, cheap, plastic tat we'd "purchased". Apparently, I soon discovered after my confession, while I was knee-deep in shopping receipts and frantically rummaging for redemption, Steph had made an online purchase.

Which was a good move by Steph. But this totally messed up my fantasised ending of us all stood at the customer service counter, laughing together like it was the end of some US sitcom. And no amount of me pleading with Steph that this had now ruined my well-crafted story arc, would persuade her to cancel the order and let me get a replacement from the store. 'They'll understand', was the only consolation offered to me, along with, 'stop being a wimp.'

So I went to return the broken watch; a watch that *we* had (unintentionally) stolen, but that *we* hadn't broken, and that *Steph* didn't want a replacement for.

Of course, you're reading this, and I suppose it makes sense to you. But that's only because I've finally arrived at a place where I can relate this tale in a fairly ordered fashion. However, the next day, as I stood in line at the return's desk, I had no idea of where to begin.

When my turn came round, I did my best to explain. I started with, 'I've come to return this watch...', and it went downhill from there very quickly. The customer service clerk must have asked me to explain the situation three times. And not knowing what transaction needed to be typed into his computer—or whether there was anything that needed to be typed into his computer—he then called over his manager for advice. I explained it to her at least three times as well. And through every reiteration of the story, questions would arise.

‘So you want a refund?’

‘No, I didn’t pay for it.’

‘Do you want a replacement?’

‘No. I don’t want it. I don’t want another one, either. I just want to return it... we’re getting another one from somewhere else.’

‘But you’re returning it because it’s broken?’

‘Yes. But I didn’t break it, I stole it; accidentally. So I was going to return it anyway, but I thought you would want to know that it’s broken...’

And on, and on it went. The story didn’t make sense, and the baffled looks on their faces proved it. As did the curious and puzzled looks on the faces of the other customers waiting in the queue behind me.

After twenty minutes of awkward conversation, they took the watch out of my hands and placed it on the counter behind them. They still didn’t get it. They had only conceded to the weirdness of the situation. But to lighten the mood, and to hopefully achieve my sitcom vision of a scene of laughter, I asked for a receipt of return.

I shouldn’t have...

I can’t blame the clerks at the supermarket for giving me those funny looks. It was a difficult story to understand. And I have no idea of what conclusions they formed after I left. Although, now that I think about it, I guess the fact that I’ve always been “randomly” selected for a security check at the self-checkout ever since tells me everything I need to know.

DAZED AND CONFUSED

The reality, though, is that some stories are hard to follow. But deep down within all of us, there’s this ingrained idea that stories must make some sort of sense if they’re to be called stories, and not riddles.

It reminds of when the final episode of the show, *Lost*, aired on Television. The day after that episode premiered, I went to work believing I had understood it all; that I had grasped the imperative conclusion of its

sixth season and had therefore understood what the show had been about since season one. But when I got the chance to share my view at the coffee machine, my opinion clashed sharply with the interpretations of two of my workmates.

Like a good number of people around the world, one of my friends was adamant that the finale had confirmed that the entire cast of characters had been dead since the first episode and that the mysterious island, which Oceanic Flight 815 had crashed on, was purgatory. I'm still not convinced that's right, regardless of how popular an idea it is. To me, that ending doesn't make any sense of the show.

For my other friend, that final episode ruined everything. He'd been *Lost's* biggest fan since it had started airing back in 2004. This was the show that he proudly hailed as the best piece of TV ever produced. But within the space of sixty minutes, his whole outlook turned a full one-eighty. In his opinion, that one episode had made a mockery of the previous 120 episodes. It had totally diverted from the main story and had answered no questions whatsoever. And to this day, my friend Matt treats the name of the show as a swear word. I risk my life uttering its name in his presence.

I can see where he's coming from. It made no sense. And, I feel, stories have got to make sense.

I'm not saying that stories can't have any depth, or multiple layers, or several micronarratives moving along and developing at the same time. I'm not saying that there cannot be a good number of principles, morals, or multiple life-lessons to glean along the way, or even a lingering sense of mystery. The best stories ever written possess all these things.

But the bigger story—the wider metanarrative of it all—has got to make some sense if we're to understand how the smaller scenes play out within it. The bigger story is what's imperative to the detail; it's what we want to know when we ask what a film, or a book, or a song, or the meaning of life, is all about. And even if you hold to there being no meaning to life, then that's still a metanarrative; you've made the idea of there being no ultimate meaning the backdrop to everything that happens in the foreground.

Whatever direction you take, the BIG story is always there. The big story is what we want to know, and what we try to communicate when asked. The big story is what the clerks at the supermarket couldn't grasp. The big story—as espoused by its final episode—is what changed my friend's opinion of *Lost*.

So I've written this book to explore that bigger story.

No, I'm not exploring the fan-theories about *Lost*. And no, I'm not going to discuss the character Kate, and her wrong decision of choosing Sawyer instead of Jack, either (even after all these years, I'm still too upset to talk about that at any depth).

But I do want to walk through the narrative of the Bible. Which is a tough task because it's a huge story which features a wide cast—an ancient story that continues to inspire writers, artists, poets, and film-makers to this day. To some extent, the Bible is not even *a* story. It's a compilation of many stories, experiences, episodes and eras. It's got layers and micro-narratives galore. So there's no way that I am going to look into every single part that contributes to forming the whole corpus of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures.

All I want to do here is to get us to think through the wider, larger, all-encompassing metanarrative through which the Scriptures move us.

Why?

Well, mainly because I'm tired of the confusion that exists around this story. I love this story, but my passion for it has subsequently developed into an irritation towards alternative ideas about this story's meaning. In particular, there are three pseudo-versions of this beautiful and complex story's thrust that I take issue with. Three versions that have also sadly glued themselves into the cultural perception of what Christianity is all about.

One of those is the idea of dominance. History testifies of Christianity being used as a means to take over and control as much of the world as possible. God, in this version, is seen as the one who sponsors political power plays—whether that be the post-Constantine Roman Empire,

Europe under Christendom, or even, in modern history, America. The metanarrative of this style of Christianity is that a select “we” are the divinely-elected elite, called to bring the world into peaceful order with as much force as necessary. It’s militant, power-hungry, often nationalistic, and always oppressive. This is what I would call Empire-Building Christianity.

A second, prevalent idea surrounding Christianity, is that it’s anti-material and hyper-spiritual. In this idea, Jesus is the golden ticket, guaranteeing us a seat on God’s bus so that we can escape the material realm and pass into a blissful, disembodied state after death. In this stance, God isn’t a fan of what Hal Lindsey’s malign ideas dubbed the ‘late great planet Earth’; it’s become filthy, wretched and beyond repair. This being the case, God is out to destroy the world, but don’t cry over this, because it’s our souls that God wants to save anyway. There’s a lot of Greek (not Jewish) thought which has led to this understanding of the biblical story, and it’s held sway in the Western Church for a long time. This is what I would call Escapist Christianity; it’s a scenario in which we’re seeking to avoid the constraints of the material life, or the fate of the Earth, or in which we’re seeking to escape a post-mortem, fire and brimstone eternity. One way or another, the story of Scripture is studied in the manner of a survivor’s guide, as we try to discover the secrets of getting our disembodied humanity (our souls) out of here.

The third trend is found in the prosperity versions of the story, where there’s a preoccupation with getting what we want, when we want, if we click our heels together in the right way. It’s a hedonistic and overtly individualistic approach, with its focus being on self-promotion, self-satisfaction and self-actualisation. Some versions of these ideas are easy to spot and are rightly avoided by many Christians. But the subtler stuff, and the ideology behind it, is still small enough to slip through the cracks in our creeds and turn the story of Scripture into an allegory of self-discovery. Especially within the streams that I belong to: the Charismatic and Pentecostal movements. Our conferences, our books, our Bible studies, etc., seem to pulsate with self-help therapy, placebo-clichés, individualism,

consumerism and an over-focus on entertainment.¹ I call this version, Exhibitionist Christianity. It may not long for financial reward (and often doesn't), but its focus on the prosperity of the self takes theology and inverts it to Me-ology. It views God as a genie. It treats Jesus as a mascot. And it makes the Spirit into a euphoria-inducing, performance-enhancing drug.

These three versions will pop up again and again as we journey through the following pages together, and hopefully, as we hold them up against the actual story, we'll be able to see how perverse, self-indulgent, and malign these alternatives are. To a great extent, all three versions could fall under the category of the "prosperity gospel" because of their infatuation with the idea of human transcendence. Even within the streams that do not teach a "name-it, claim-it" exhibitionist attitude towards power, possessions and personal success, the ideas of political/global dominance (Empire-Building), or abandoning the economic and ecological world to some doomsday event (Escapist), can still leave an infectious taint on a beautiful story that is really about the Kingdom of God.

The problem I have—and I am not alone in this—is that in every one of the alternative versions of the story, there is a focus on *I* (or even a select *we*) living some version of the human dream. These versions also make the Earth look like a disposable prop, and they make serious character statements about God. And when our image of God is perverted, our expression of God, or "God's will", is also perverted.

However, the Judaeo-Christian dream, as told in the Bible's grand narrative, has never been the transcendence or transmigration of humanity into some heavenly sphere, or into global dominance, or into our ideas of the perfect me. The central focus of this story, its main melody, has always been the descent and dwelling of God on Earth.

We're going to explore this story, in a roundabout way, through this book. Because if we can get the metanarrative of the story correct, if we can hear the pulse behind this age-old song, I believe we'll be in a better

position to understand what it means to declare ourselves as followers of Jesus.

BLOWING MY TRUMPET

As a matter of importance, I need to add here that this book isn't a denominational thing. This isn't me holding up my own tribe as the answer to it all. Far from it. My tribe isn't flawless. Moreover, over the past few years, I've found myself increasingly tribe-less. I've found myself listening to and agreeing with more voices that are outside of the Pentecostal communion than within it. That's not to say that I no longer regard myself as Pentecostal; I can "boom-shaka-lakka" as well as the next person, but being Pentecostal isn't my aim. Maybe it's because I'm from a non-Christian background originally, and I'm what some people would term a 'first-generation Pentecostal', but my goal is to be a disciple of Jesus, and I feel that there is much that we Pentecostals have to learn from the more liturgical, sacramental and contemplative branches of the church that can help with this.

In all quarters of the Western Church, though, these three alternative ideas on Christianity can be present or absent. No quarter is immune to their influences. But that's not to say that every church or Christian is under their influence, either. There are voices in each quarter of Christianity that speak either for or against these things. But because I'm from the Pentecostal/Charismatic section, I'll obviously be taking prophetic aim at those in my own camp. That may make us sound worse than we are, so I'll apologise for this in advance. We're not all that bad, and there's beauty and truth I have gleaned from within Pentecostalism that I will cherish always—regardless of wherever I end up in the future. That said, I'm well aware that some of what I've written here will clash sharply with my single-generation roots. I could, and will, I suspect, lose friends over this.

Unlike my first book, *Love: Expressed*, there's a bit more of a theological slant here. But I've done my best to convey what I have to say in a way that isn't overwhelming. Hopefully, the words that follow will maintain a degree

of depth and still move at a good pace. To help with that flow, I've avoided heavy theological words or other jargon as much as possible. And where I couldn't avoid this, I've made sure to include some explanation in the endnotes.

I'm aware that some of my non-Christian friends will be reading this too; you'll be able to follow this, and it might surprise you. To my Christian friends, it should surprise you as well. Whoever you are, we'll take this journey slowly—a step at a time. There'll be a bit of going back and forth, there'll inevitably be some overlap, and some things might make better sense on the second time through. But we will get there in the end as long as we keep putting one foot in front of the other.

I should warn you: you're entering my wrestling match here; it's a tug-of-war that I've been engaged in for the past decade, and that certainly isn't going to come to an end tomorrow. This book will not give you all the answers, but I am hoping that it sparks enough of the right questions.

In short, this book won't settle you. If it does, then I've failed. My hope is that it will shake our Empire-Building, Escapist, Exhibitionist Christian tendencies to their foundations, and that it will take its place alongside the other voices that also march and blow their trumpets around these forbidding, foreign walls, hoping for their collapse. Who knows, maybe, by the end of this, we'll all be in a better position to know what it is to live the dream of God.

— Tristan Sherwin.

**LIVING
THE
DREAM?**



PROLOGUE

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was unformed and void, darkness was on the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God hovered over the surface of the water.

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. So there was evening, and there was morning, one day.

God said, “Let there be a dome in the middle of the water; let it divide the water from the water.” God made the dome and divided the water under the dome from the water above the dome; that is how it was, and God called the dome Sky. So there was evening, and there was morning, a second day.

God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let dry land appear,” and that is how it was. God called the dry land Earth, the gathering together of the water he called Seas, and God saw that it was good.

God said, “Let the earth put forth grass, seed-producing plants, and fruit trees, each yielding its own kind of seed-bearing fruit, on the earth”; and that is how it was. The earth brought forth grass, plants each yielding its own kind of seed, and trees each producing its own kind of seed-bearing fruit; and God saw that it was good. So there was evening, and there was morning, a third day.

God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to divide the day from the night; let them be for signs, seasons, days and years; and let them be for lights in the dome of the sky to give light to the earth”; and that is how it was. God made the two great lights — the larger light to rule the day and the smaller light to rule the night — and the stars. God put them in the dome of the sky to give light to the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness; and God saw that it was good. So there was evening, and there was morning, a fourth day

God said, “Let the water swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open dome of the sky.” God created the great sea creatures and every living thing that creeps, so that the water swarmed with all kinds of them, and there was every kind of winged bird; and God saw that it was good. Then God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful, multiply and fill the water of the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” So there was evening, and there was morning, a fifth day.

God said, “Let the earth bring forth each kind of living creature — each kind of livestock, crawling animal and wild beast”; and that is how it was. God made each kind of wild beast, each kind of livestock and every kind of animal that crawls along the ground; and God saw that it was good.

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, in the likeness of ourselves; and let them rule over the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the animals, and over all the earth, and over every crawling creature that crawls on the earth.” So God created humankind in his own image; in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them. God blessed them: God said to them, “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea, the birds in the air and every living creature that crawls on the earth.” Then God said, “Here! Throughout the whole earth I am giving you as food every seed-bearing plant and every tree with seed-bearing fruit. And to every wild animal, bird in the air and creature crawling

on the earth, in which there is a living soul, I am giving as food every kind of green plant.” And that is how it was. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good. So there was evening, and there was morning, a sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, along with everything in them.

On the seventh day God was finished with his work which he had made, so he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. God blessed the seventh day and separated it as holy; because on that day God rested from all his work which he had created, so that it itself could produce.

— B'resheet (Genesis) 1:1 - 2:3,
Complete Jewish Bible (CJB)

PART 01 | DIVINE ORIGINS & HUMAN TRAJECTORIES

In the beginning God created the heavens and
the earth.
– Genesis²

Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our
heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.
– St Augustine of Hippo³

Man is best defined not as a 'logical' but as a
'Eucharistic' animal. He does not merely live in
the world, think about it and use it, but he is
capable of seeing the world as God's gift, as a
sacrament of God's presence and a means of
communion with him.
– Bishop Kallistos Ware⁴

I sometimes think that God in creating man
somewhat overestimated his ability.
– Oscar Wilde⁵

1.1 | MINE!

Our youngest child is addicted to a computer game called Minecraft™.

If life could be as he wanted it—if his dream could become reality—each day would consist of spending his waking hours immersed within this environment of pixels. For those of you who have miraculously escaped the news of this particular computer game, the premise is extremely simple: You mine, and yes—you guessed it—you craft, in a virtual world where everything is formed by blocks. And I mean everything. With the exception of the round eggs that the square chickens lay and the odd corner of rail track, Minecraft takes a purist approach to right angles. The vivid landscapes of mountains and forests, and the pigs, Mooshrooms, people and monsters which inhabit them, are all fashioned from blocks.

Cubes.

Cuboids.

No arcs, bends or radii allowed.

When you first enter this rectilinear paradise/purgatory (depending on how you want to look at it), you'll find yourself being launched into a land stocked full of resources; a dystopian, unblemished canvas, where, after excavating the raw materials and mixing them with huge dollops of imagination, you can 'build whatever you like'—to use my son's terminology. The terrain's loaded up, and ready and waiting for you to breathe your personality all over it. Every nanobyte of this pixelated world and all it contains belongs to *you*, and *you* are free to do whatever *you* desire to do with it—within programming limits, of course. And so long as it doesn't require curves.

As far as computer games go, Minecraft has split opinion in our home. As parents, Steph and I love the creative aspect of the game; our son has to imagine and execute his ideas. This is far better, we feel, than following predetermined stories which only help to refine the motor skill of 'button-bashing'.

That aside, Steph's still nicknamed the game 'Bore-Craft'; it's hardly entertaining to watch and the soundtrack either lulls you to sleep or drives you insane.

I, on the other hand, differ. I was intrigued by this world of perpendicular possibilities and took a more direct approach; which involved grabbing a control-pad and tagging along with Eaden in his virtual experiences. It was time for a Dad-and-Lad team-up as we began to cast our artistic vision into the world.

But that's when the problems started.

It goes without saying that *you* can't build the world as *you* would want it when there's two of *you* on the scene. Instead, it's dappled with "make do's" and conflict.

Why? Well, I could blame it all on the fact that my eight-year-old takes a different approach to mine when it comes to construction; after all, he's not here to defend himself. But I'll hold my hands up and confess that I'm equally responsible for the chaos that ensued.

All right, I'll admit it; it's all my fault.

Call me a traditionalist, but when *I* build a wall, and the game offers me the raw materials of brick, stone, or purple wool, I'm going to avoid the latter. Even pixelated wool probably lacks the strength and integrity that I believe is required of a wall. Not to mention the devastation that a torrent of rain would cause! But not my son, Eaden. Oh no. It's wool all the way; as above, so below. Wool walls, combined with wool roofs, and wool fireplaces.

And when there is no wool left? Slime.

Not only did we clash on materials, but colour schemes presented further tensions. I wanted sandstone walls, terracotta roof tiles, and nice oak flooring—all in their natural, realistic hues, please. Is that too much to ask? But not my son—my beautiful, wonderful son, whom I happen to love very much, I should add. His world was a collage of vibrant contrasts; an explosion of colour. Like it had been caught between a giant game of paintball and a Holi Festival.

All of this drove me round the bend—or at least a faceted version of a bend.

We both had different ideas; our dreams clashed, our wills collided, and the world we were crafting became collateral damage caught up in the procession of our egos. Instead of paradise, a dystopia of division and disharmony emerged.

Nothing demonstrates this more than my granite-grey Norman castle standing in the looming shadow of a giant statue of *Sponge Bob Square Pants* (made of wool, of course).

It turned out that the virtual world of Minecraft wasn't big enough to house both of us; we both couldn't play God.

PYRAMIDS

But imagine for a moment a world that *was* big enough. And then populate it with over seven billion people.

Seven billion ways.

Seven billion wills.

Seven billion dreams.

Within that world, there would be an existence of harmony amongst certain groups of people—places where dreams would merge and a kind of “truce” would occur on a macro-sociological scale. But between the other groups, and in the cracks of those that appeared to be cohesive at large, dreams would clash, tensions would intensify, and oppression, struggle and disharmony would exist.

Give those seven billion inhabitants the same, shared volume of resource, the same building blocks—the raw material of our planet—and there will be those who gather and hoard mass quantities of it from others; along with those who would steal, kill and conquer in order to control that resource; and many who would be left with nothing at all. Unlike players of Minecraft, we're not so geometrically restricted when we build. And yet, despite the abundance of geometric options available to us, there's always one shape that consistently emerges. Whether we consider things physically,

socially, politically, technologically, religiously, or economically, pyramids always seem to arise. And at the top of those pyramids, within the fraction that controls and owns much, a further subdivision of people will exist; those who, motivated through individualistic or tribal tendencies and driven by materialistic and consumeristic greed, will unbelievably hold to the notion that they have hardly anything at all.

Then tell that fraction—the well-resourced and “blessed” part—to go and live their dreams; go and fill the world with their personality and make it theirs! Then stand back and observe as things go crazy. Especially as that privileged fraction doesn’t recognise that from much of the world’s perspective, they’re *already* living the dream. That fact rarely enters into the brains of the few. They don’t see what their global neighbours have or haven’t got, so appreciation only ever peaks in the stunted form of gratitude, and never matures into generosity. Instead, what captures their attention and grabs at their hearts, is what those next door possess or what the industrial, money-grabbing conveyors of dreams tell us we should have. And so the grasping for more—more power, more resource, more *mining* of what we feel is rightfully *mine*—continues to play on a perpetual loop.

It’s difficult to resist the human compulsion to *mine*; to covet, take, control, horde and label as *mine* as much as possible. To act in opposition to this drive, to label things as *yours* or *ours*, seems unnatural at times within the Western hemisphere. Unless, of course, it’s with regards to those things which are undesirable, like war, poverty, disease and disaster.

As a result of all this mining, a world of contrasts emerges, and the contrasts should hit us hard. For many in our world, the biggest causes of death are malnutrition, disease, and war. For others, its greed, health problems related to obesity, and lack of exercise.

It’s rather out-of-balance, isn’t it? The world, as it currently finds itself, is full of more stark and disturbing disparities than that of a Norman castle with *Sponge-Bob* as its neighbour.

And yet, are any of us living the dream? It seems the more we try to make the world in our image, the more problems arise. It’s suffocating, to

some extent. Life, *real* life—whatever we believe that consists of—gets stifled as we, alongside everyone else, fight to breathe our expression of self into the world. Like continually breathing into a paper bag, it feels good at the start, cathartic almost, to fill the world with *I*. But if we do it for long enough, we end up choking; choking on our own expression. We keep breathing heavily into this paper bag called self, trying to expand it further, because we’ve been sold the lie that there is enough for all of us to have as much as we want, whenever we want, however we want it. Sadly—but also thankfully—this isn’t true.

Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky poignantly wrote:

The world says: “You have needs—satisfy them. You have as much right as the rich and the mighty. Don’t hesitate to satisfy your needs; indeed expand your needs and demand more.” This is the worldly doctrine of today. And they believe that this is freedom. The result for the rich is isolation and suicide, for the poor, envy and murder.⁶

It goes without saying that *you* can’t build the world as *you* would want it when there is more than *you* on the scene.

But I’m not talking solely about the world here.

Within some branches of Christianity, the Minecraft way of thinking is not too far beneath the surface: The world and all it contains belongs to you, and you can do whatever you want to do with it—within faceted moral limits—because God wants what you want. God is for *you*, after all, and against those who would disagree with your colour scheme or choice of building materials. Repeating the “worldly doctrine” that Dostoyevsky expressed, some streams even tell us to expand our needs; believe and pray for bigger and for more and never doubt your “God-given potential” (which can be a veiled way of talking about demanding what you want). Accumulating wealth and resource within this theological framework is then understood as a blessing, ordained by God as proof of your devotion and

“special-ness” in comparison to everyone else. Proof that God wants more of *me* and less of *them*. Or more like *me*, and less like *them*.

Mining is the goal, and losing, or so this way of thinking believes, is not what following Jesus looks like. ‘*Laying your life down for the Gospel*’, is interpreted as ‘*Be prepared to go through hell to get what you want*’, and ‘*Picking up your cross*’ is taken as the price-tag on our own dreams coming to fruition; the cost of self-realisation and self-actualisation. In the Prosperity, Self-help, Seven-steps-to-success “gospels”, *you* is the image that is called to be expressed on the world’s stage. And the world has become sadly distorted as a stage for human ego; a temporary proving ground full of resource for the transcendence of *our* humanity.

Winning, achieving your personal goals and life-hacks are the commission, benediction and liturgy of the modern age. Consumerism, Materialism, and Individualism have crept into the body of Christ like a cancerous parasite. So instead of resembling an organism of blessing to the world, we often resemble a self-serving hive of ego.

Maybe it’s only a coincidence that the bestsellers at my local Christian bookshop don’t look all that different from the contents of a gamer’s “hints and tips” guide to Minecraft?

Admittedly, some of this isn’t too easy to detect; it’s not glaringly obvious all the time. It’s often subtly wrapped up in the guise of religion, accompanied by faux incense and smoke (glitz and glamour), and acted out to a soundtrack of praise. And in the euphoria-steeped moments of this charade, it’s easy to find yourself being dragged along with the current. As I said, the human compulsion to *mine* is a difficult tendency to resist. Especially when it’s being endorsed. But if we would only pause to consider for a moment on a Sunday morning, and like Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz*, if we only had the courage to draw back the curtain on our theology, maybe we too would discover that there is no divine life pulsating through this form of religion, other than the man-made, man-operated, smoke-and-mirrors light show.

Then again, would we want this not to be about *us*? Perhaps we'd prefer to keep the curtain? Maybe we're worried that if we did pull back the drapes on our religion, we'd catch a glimpse of *me* behind the veil, pushing all the pedals and pulling all the levers?

But what if—and I know I might have to stretch some thinking here—this life isn't about *me*, or *I*, or solely even *us*? What if the world isn't a stage or a testing ground? What if all of this is not about *you* at all, but about *everything*? And by everything, I mean everything. Including all the things we would prefer to write off as the construction materials for the citadels of our egos.

What if the centre of all this, the purpose of all this, wasn't to *mine*?

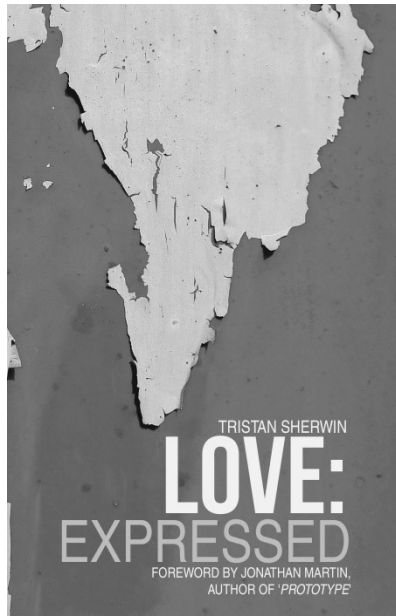
It's time to reboot the programming. So with that in mind, let's go back to the beginning.

But what do I mean by *beginning* exactly?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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“Love: Expressed is a work of dirt-under-your-fingers spirituality”

—Jonathan Martin, author of *Prototype* and *How to Survive a Shipwreck*

ENDNOTES

INTRODUCTION

1 Throughout this book I'll be addressing the problem of self-help, *not* self-care. As someone who experienced a painful nervous breakdown through a lack of good self-care, and who has since been dutiful in attending to my health and well-being, I would not dismiss the power of rest, encouragement, or support, nor the importance of learning to say 'no.' Healthy choices are essential. Additionally, God, I feel, wants us to enjoy, delight and savour the goodness and beauty that is inherent within creation.

However, there exists a deluge of 'sausage factory' clichés that drain the appreciation for self and others out of us. Most of these maxims and programmes, instead of fuelling self-love and love of others, just fuel fear, shame and a huge sense of inadequacy. Sure, some of these ideas can come through guilt-inducing doctrines (to which I don't subscribe), such as total depravity or not trusting our emotions. But there are plenty of non-doctrinal teachings, both within the church and outside of it, that masquerade as self-care but are really self-obsession (we'll touch on this more at the start of Part Five). We are in desperate need of healthy rhythms in our lives—so take good care of yourself (and others), and watch which ideologies you feed yourself on.

For me personally, self-care started when I stopped listening to the self-help mantras of 'achieve, attain, accomplish', and when, I must admit, I stopped holding onto to *mine* so tightly.

PART ONE

2 Genesis 1:1 (NLT)

14 | LIVING THE DREAM?

- 3 St Augustine of Hippo (c. AD 354 - 430), *Confessions* 1.1
- 4 Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, rev. ed. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), p. 53-54. Used with permission.
- 5 Attributed to Oscar Wilde (AD 1854–1900)
- 6 Fyodor Dostoyevsky (AD 1821-1881), *The Brothers Karamazov*.