

The Cost of Salvation

by

WILLIAM DALTON FRIZZELL

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Committee Members:

Richard Saxton

Yumi Roth

Alvin Gregorio

Iskra Fileva

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Abstract

When I was in the third grade, I attended the funeral of a classmate's father, a soldier who had died in Iraq. I distinctly recall the tear-stained faces of friends and the images of Jesus Christ that adorned the chapel. Sentiments heard after the service such as, "It's all part of God's plan," and "We'll see him again in heaven," were etched into my developing brain. Behind these consoling expressions is the indication that a belief in an afterlife should alleviate the feeling of finality found in the face of death within the Christian context.

My work examines the concepts and beliefs of Christianity with a non-believer's twenty-first century perspective – informed by branches of philosophy, fields of scientific enquiry, and personal accounts of believers throughout my life. Christianity is rich with important historical figures, distinct denominations, and artworks. The artworks and artifacts of Christendom from which I reinterpret in my work, range from the artifacts such as the Shroud of Turin and 17th century paintings to modern day Jehovah's Witness carts and televangelism. The influence of this tradition can be seen the world over, as there are over two billion self-identified Christians on Earth. If one looks to the core doctrine of Christianity, they'll find promises of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as so solemnly stated in John 3:16, "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*" Death merely acts as a gateway to a better place with God if one believes it is so. Religious dogmas play an important role in how most of our societies reconcile with death – this is not explicitly a Christian phenomenon, but death is a central tenet of the Christian faith. *My Savior* considers how the comfort sought in religion in times of high

mortality salience and modern methods of preaching on video and the selling of products through televangelist methodologies can monetarily exploit those who seek said comfort in times of uncertainty. Many opportunists will and have taken advantage of situations like the one we are currently in regarding this pandemic, such as televangelist Jim Bakker, who attempted to sell “Silver Solution” miracle products to his viewers claiming it would cure coronaviruses and dozens of other ailments. For *My Savior*, I have been working with a leading manufacturer and supplier of wholesale children’s plush toys to produce a rendition of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion in order to demonstrate the peculiar form of comfort sought in Christ’s bloody sacrifice by believers and the influence the Church has on patrons seeking salvation. Televangelists, just as with any other pastor or minister, can be seen by their congregates as an intermediary of God’s word. This position signifies such a person as a conduit for salvation and a trust that they are acting in the best interest of the congregates to become closer with God. This plush crucifixion is filmed and advertised in the same form that televangelists, such as Bakker, broadcast their products on television to exploit viewers in a time of great insecurity. However, *My Savior* will not promise any miracle or salvation, as it would merely echo these ideas back onto the viewer.

Chapter I

Introduction

Having grown up in Colorado Springs, which was given the moniker “the Evangelical Vatican” for its headquartering of dozens of religious organizations, influenced my life and introduction to art. My early perception was that art was that which displayed skills of the hand, such as high fidelity in painting figures. This was the pinnacle of what art had to offer. Much of this early influence was found in the ‘Ninja Turtle’ artists – Michelangelo, Donatello, Raphael, and Leonardo, each of whom were commissioned to create works of Christian devotion across Europe. However, as my passion for artmaking grew and I began my studies pursuing my BFA, my education of art history and contemporary art did as well. Philosophies of art and the creation of work were no longer bound to commissions by officials of a wealthy stature within a religious framework, but as a reflection of a diverse landscape of expression and experimentation in subject, style and context. Depictions of daily life, an emphasis on exploring color relationships, and a urinal as conceptual investigation became the new catalogue in which I could explore ideas established by forebearers. Joseph Kosuth, an American conceptual artist of the 1960s wrote in *Art After Philosophy* about the change that occurred on the meta-narrative of artworks and their function when Marcel Duchamp was making readymades at the beginning of the 20th century, “This change – one from ‘appearance’ to ‘conception’ – was the beginning of ‘modern’ art and the beginning of ‘conceptual’ art. All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually.”¹ Ideas and writings such as this terraformed the very ground from which I began developing my practice.

¹ Joseph Kosuth, “Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990.”, 843.

As the possibilities of art practices and study widened, I was never able to escape the intrigue set upon me by my initial entanglement with religious faith. As I was growing up, unable to grasp or truly convey the queries I had from my early experiences with visiting churches for holidays, funerals, and weddings. I began to reassess the meaning of Christianity, not only as a lens in which to reconsider the works of art I admired, but to interrogate the claims of the doctrine which had colored the background of my existence since childhood.

Perhaps the single most affirming moment which I can recall was in the spring of 2012, right before I left for college to study art. I recall one day after school, walking up to the front porch of my house and seeing a gift bag, addressed to me personally. Upon inspection I discovered a book, *New Believers*, detailing and breaking down contents of the Bible. Alongside it, a note which had been signed anonymously as “Someone who cares. A lot.”, which read, “Dalton, I hope you make time to read this; you will never regret it. I pray you will choose to surrender your life to Jesus Christ so that He can use you, your gift and talents to enhance His Kingdom. Use the index if you are unfamiliar with God’s plan of salvation.” To this day, I still do not know who left me this book. It even contained a glossary of terms with highlighted annotations which the enigmatic donor hoped would encourage me to affirm the faith I grew up around. Conversely, I believe that singular gesture reinvigorated my attempt to understand the power of Christian thought that I hadn’t quite endorsed in my teen years, leading to my non-belief and the work that has become *My Savior*.

In my studies since, my work has been an investigation of the theological concepts of Christianity which for centuries has induced immense ecstasy and incredible intolerance.

This ranges from the impact on the history of art, the societal implications of beliefs, and the artifacts which give a perceived credence to the claims of salvation through a surrendering of

one's life to Jesus Christ. Ample appreciation is owed to the influence of contemporary writers such as Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris, who presented arguments that truly expanded my ability to translate my research into my artistic practice.

At this particular moment in the world, the threat of annihilation is even more prominent in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The effect this novel coronavirus has had on communities of faith is what I assess in *My Savior*. The history of preaching remotely, through radio, has existed since the early twentieth century. This practice allowed sermons to be heard from the comfort of one's own home. In recent months, most religious congregation has been transitioned to the virtual realm.² Luckily, our advancements in video technology have allowed almost all affected communities of faith to continue meeting without unnecessary risk of spreading the virus at large. However, not all broadcasts by religious figures in this era seek to promote a rational view of how to deal with the changes to public health, or the peril of millions of people across the globe. However, this project is not just looking at the relationship modern televangelists have with products. It is highly informed by the centuries of linkages between Christianity, death, and art.

² *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, "Americans Oppose Religious Exemptions From Coronavirus-Related Restrictions." August 7, 2020.

Chapter II

Death, God, and Art

The predetermined consequence of being a living creature is the eventuality of death. Being that humans are the only known species of animal that can contemplate the abstract nature of this phenomenon, we may be alone in our endeavor to ponder the larger meaning of its requirement. Our situation is such that we have centuries of theories and concepts in philosophy, mythology, theology, literature, and art to study the subject and are no further on the path to reconciliation when it comes our mortality. The innate condition of our demise connects us to all conscious beings bound to the same destiny, yet our benefit of this knowledge isolates us and sets us adrift in a sea of ultimate ignorance until we reach the cliff edge of demise.

From the Golden Age of Rome with figures such as Marcus Aurelius to 20th century German Martin Heidegger, many philosophers have attempted to describe the phenomenon in order to conjure a perception of our existence that may inch us towards a representative view of existence in said ignorance. Aurelius, famous for his contributions as a Stoic philosopher, writes in *Meditations*,

“Don’t look down on death but welcome it. It too is one of the things required by nature. Like youth and old age. Like growth and maturity. Like a new set of teeth, a beard, the first gray hair. Like sex and pregnancy and childbirth. Like all the other physical changes at each stage of life, our dissolution is no different. So, this is how a thoughtful person should await death: not with indifference, not with impatience, not with disdain, but simply viewing it as one of the things that happen to us.”³

This sobering approximation of the inevitable advocates an embrace of our lack of control and therefore, acceptance. Existentialists such as Heidegger were more interested in examining the process of death phenomenologically, he referred to our state of ‘being’

³ Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations*, The Internet Classics Archive.

(“Dasein”) as a state of “Being-towards-death”⁴ in his 1927 magnum opus *Being and Time*. He refers to the attempt of understanding our own non-existence in the following terms: "The more unveiledly this possibility (of non-existence) gets understood, the more purely does the understanding penetrate into it as ‘the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all.’”⁵ His sketch of the circumstance of death shone a light on the veiled nature to which gives us the most pause – the fact that we will cease to exist as we do now, and how that radical change from being a part of everything to dissolving into nothing is opaque to us. This very opaque quality is what leaves that nothingness just out of reach, prompting an endless search for answers.

However poignant one may feel in pondering their own demise, religions and mythologies have held a monopoly on creation stories and explanations of death for centuries – the origins of Greek mythology can be traced back to *The Theogony*, a poem by Hesiod around the 8th century BC – The Greek god Thanatos, the personification of death, brought the deceased to the underworld.⁶ Our imaginations and evolutionary needs to understand the mechanics of reality grant us the power to state what Evolutionary Biologist Bret Weinstein calls “metaphorical truths”: stories which may be literally false and falsifiable by scientific and rational means, *but if one behaved as if they were true*, there may exist an advantage in how you act in certain circumstances at certain times.⁷ For instance, it is absolutely understandable that those who lived during the period of the Inquisition observed the imprisonment or burning and of heretics at the stake would be compelled to act as a good Catholic. This, however, does not affirm the veracity of Catholicism or any claim by the Church, it was simply the case that

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. (State University of New York Press, 2010) 306.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 307.

⁶ Hesiod, *Theogony*. (Claredon, 1966) p.153

⁷ Pangburn, “Sam Harris & Jordan Peterson - Vancouver – 2,” 2018, video, 15:19-16:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEf6X-FueMo>

treating the tenets of faith as true ensured your survival. This notion was brought forth as Dr. Weinstein was a moderator for a discussion between atheist and neuroscientist Sam Harris and clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson in 2018.⁸ In this discussion, they deliberate the nature of truth and traditional religious beliefs within the western ethos. Harris, a notable public intellectual and atheist describes how the mystery and profundity that has persisted in the Biblical story can be observed and comprehended by those who read it, all without granting credence to the claims found therein. Harris claims that we engage in this process when dealing with fictional stories, but also with many gods who “lie buried in the mass grave we call ‘mythology’.”⁹

In *Sapiens*, historian Yuval Noah Harari presents a comprehensive biography of our species and the rise of religious thinking in the scope of human history. Through an evolutionary lens, Harari demonstrates that Homo sapiens implanted meaning into the qualities of life that were dimly understood – giving rise to animism, polytheistic cultures, and the monotheistic God of Christianity.¹⁰ The Christian God – creator deity who loves his creations and who devised the mechanics of this reality so that at the end of our time in this cosmos, our fate after death rests in accordance with our deeds. This view of the world supposes that our lives are not merely a mysterious journey where we may finally venture into the non-being we were before birth, rather a step into a next life with God. In some sense, this belief strips the weight of death’s proposition. What could really be bad about death for the person dying, if it is essentially stepping into a turnstile with God on the other side?

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Sam Harris, “Sam Harris vs. Rick Warren.” 2007

¹⁰ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: a Brief History of Humankind* (Harper Perennial, 2018) 211–213.

Psychologists Jonathan Jong and Jamin Halberstadt, authors of *Death Anxiety and Religious Belief: An Existential Psychology of Religion* look into thanatocentric (death-centered) theories of religious belief. One theory they take heavily into account is Terror Management Theory (TMT), which was originally incepted by anthropologist Ernest Becker in his 1973 book *The Denial of Death*. In this Pulitzer Prize winning text, Becker argues that most human actions are done in order to avoid the inevitability of death. Jong and Halberstadt address two claims made from thanatocentric theories such as this, “First, that death anxiety motivates religious belief, and second, that religious belief mitigates death anxiety.”¹¹ Where these two factors together seem to lead to an inevitable confusion wherein those who lean into religion with death anxiety stand near those who don’t have it because of their faith. However, Jong and Halberstadt track these attitudes along a curvilinear (inverted U-shape) along a pair of axes. (*fig. 1*).

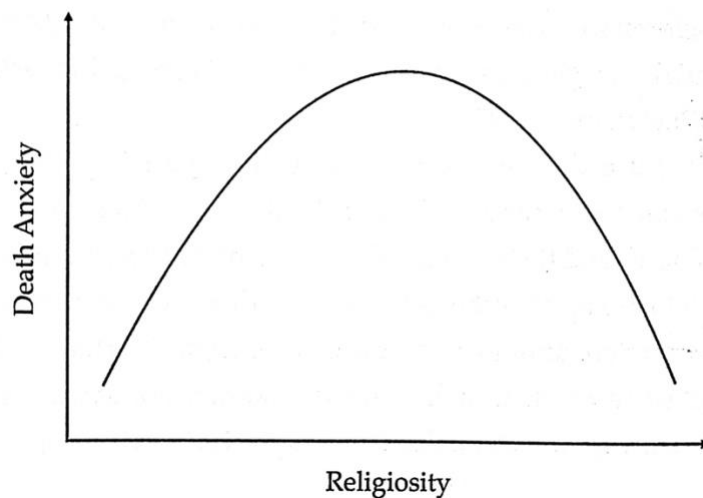


Figure 1. Schematic from “Death Anxiety and Religious Belief: An Existential Psychology of Religion” correlating the claims put forth by Terror Management Theory. Courtesy of Jong and Halberstadt

¹¹ Jonathan Jong and Jamin Halberstadt, *Death Anxiety and Religious Belief: An Existential Psychology of Religion*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 116.

With this schematic, it's clearer to see that those who may not hold certain convictions about God and notions of the afterlife may be tempted to, given the right amount of death anxiety. Conversely, it's also possible to see how those who are the most religious are not fearful of death given a belief in salvation in heaven in the first place. Many of us do our best to avoid thinking of death on a daily basis, unless you are rather fond of stress-testing TMT, that is. To have faith in this salvation is to not require evidence in support of said claim. However, there are few instances of 'evidence' which grant those anticipating an afterlife some grounds to speak of the mystery behind the resurrection of Christ. One such object is the Shroud of Turin, a linen cloth believed to be the burial cloth of Christ post-crucifixion. Housed in Turin, Italy, the shroud has perplexed believers and non-believers alike.



Figure 2. William Dalton Frizzell, *mors vincit omnia*, printed vinyl plastic and nylon, 52" x 83.5", 2020

The official position of the Church and of the current Pope – Pope Francis – is that the shroud acts as an icon rather than proof of resurrection. Decades of scientific studies including radiocarbon dating and forensic testing, beginning in 1969, have been inconclusive as to its legitimacy. The core belief behind the shroud is that the imprinted image of the mystery man should be seen as vindication of a resurrected Christ. However, in order for this belief to be maintained, one must accept and believe that the laws of physics and biological decomposition of a corpse can be reversed. The early stages of death involve the blood settling within the body, the breakdown of cell membranes, and the self-digestion of the cadaver. All of these processes occur when the body is contained in a cadaver bag, leading to my work entitled *mors vincit omnia* (fig.2), which depicts the shroud imprinted on a medium-weight cadaver bag, juxtaposing the finality of death and the decay of a corpse with the belief in the resurrection. *Mors vincit omnia* examines the Shroud from a biological and physics perspective, arising in a fairly clear read of its intent as an artwork by a non-believer. However, *My Savior* addresses these in a less blunt manner by advertising and paralleling the language and the meaning of salvation through Christ and attempting to sell an embodiment of it.

As centuries passed and cultures arose, depictions of beliefs transcended the spoken and written word. As man became aware of mark-making and the power depict ideas into physical objects and gestures, artworks have attempted to bridge the intangible gap between wonder and knowledge. This cultural story has filled the canonical history of western art by relying on and producing the namesakes the likes of Michelangelo and Caravaggio. Artists whose purpose served the masses in displaying this religious tale so significantly that they need only exist now as exceptional mononyms. Michelangelo's frescos on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel attract so

much inquiry that it has become the most visited room in the world,¹² attracting nearly five million people per year. Undoubtedly some envision that room as being divinely touched by the artist, whose message (dictated and commissioned by the Church) cuts away the fear of the unknown from the minds of the devout and assures that this story of our existence has a purpose and destiny beyond our peril, orchestrated by God.

These cultural artifacts transcend a single nation or hemisphere - over 2 billion other humans believe that God incarnated himself into his son, Jesus Christ, in order to meet his demise for the rest of us to be saved from eternal damnation. While the validity of such a concept has been slowly eroded in portions of the public sphere by ever-evolving fields operating under the scientific method, the details of this story were masterfully depicted centuries over. Thus, ensuring the specifics and believability of such a claim outlast generations of us to come. This inseparable intermingling of death, art, and the purpose behind our universe grants the Christian conception of our deaths a conceivability that may never be lifted from the foundations of our human zeitgeist. This undoubtedly has, does, and will continue to convince billions of people to seek salvation through Christ.

To fully illuminate the homogeneity of death, art, and God, I will contextualize the impact that Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio had within Rome, the Church, and the congregates around the beginning of the 17th century. First, we must dissect a pivotal transition in the history of the Church almost a century prior. In 1517, professor of theology, priest and Augustinian monk Martin Luther wrote *Ninety-five Theses or Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*. This work was highly critical of Church practices, including – as the title suggests – the sale of indulgences as repentance against sins. Luther felt that this practice created a faux-

¹² Philip Pullella, “Vatican May Eventually Limit Sistine Chapel Visits.” *Reuters*, Oct. 2012.

reality within the Church, whereby those who sinned never truly reconciled nor felt the sorrow or remorse behind their sinful acts – they could merely pay to have them absolved. This text, which was pivotal to the era known as the Protestant Reformation, continued to claim that the Church was itself losing its place in the pursuit of a true relationship to God. After this point, many Protestants (advocates of Luther’s ideas) were split about the role that art should play within their Churches. This led to a great decline in the production of art in certain European countries. However, during the final year of the 16th century, 28-year-old Caravaggio was awarded his first commission by the Catholic Church, which was seeking to reconcile what the *Ninety-Five Theses* had purported.¹³



Figure 3. Caravaggio, *Supper at Emmaus*, 1601, oil on canvas

¹³ Sebastian Schütze, *Caravaggio: The Complete Works* (Taschen, 2017) 126.

Though Caravaggio's career was not perfect, and much of his work was rejected by Church officials, he was a leading figure in the Counter-Reformation period, whereby the goal of the Church was to "present the religious experience as an assault on one's physical senses, such that one's bodily attention would be captured, and then the mind's attention caught also."¹⁴ What stood apart with Caravaggio's depictions of the Biblical story was its grounding in reality. Many works of the era prior to the Reformation depicted scenes of Christ and Saints as otherworldly, swirled in heavenly clouds placed flatly and artificially within the composition, wherein the heavens and Earth were nearly touching. One example of this can be seen most clearly in Dosso Dossi's *The Ascension*. If one juxtaposes that work with Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus* (fig. 3), it will become clear that his work grounds the humanity of Christ in a way that places the viewers in direct contact with the verses they knew. The scene of *Supper at Emmaus* takes place in the Gospel of St. Luke 24:13-35, wherein Christ reveals Himself to two disciples as they are discussing the resurrection with Him. Yet, they do not recognize Christ until He blesses the bread before them.¹⁵ This moment is captured in Caravaggio's style of tenebrism, a dark and moody atmosphere with heavily contrasted light and shadow. The way Caravaggio tricks the eye into pulling elements of the picture plane beyond the canvas, allowed the mostly illiterate populous to see the Christ from scripture before them in a new light. Caravaggio's commissions by the Church brought the promise of Christ, His sacrifice, and our salvation after death to the eyes of Italy and the world, because after all – seeing is believing.

¹⁴ Beth Williamson, *Christian Art: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2004) 102.

¹⁵ Sebastian Schütze, *Caravaggio: The Complete Works*, 202.

Chapter III

Unorthodox Revelations

The handiwork of artists like Caravaggio continued to convince much of the world that the Christian story and its suggestion of salvation were vindicated. However, as centuries rolled on, the human desire for answers crept into the picture and introduced areas of research which began to cast doubt - the most omnipresent danger to religious faith. Ideas that persist to millions, if not billions of people, do not change overnight. Doubt in this realm is not akin to a nuclear bomb of immediate devastation. It erodes slowly over time, as water does to a canyon. Given the quantity of information and pace of growing technologies we are now able to access in the twenty-first year of the twentieth century, there has never been a better time to be inquisitive. Undoubtedly, we arrived at this state of intelligence by countless people dedicating their lives towards building, fixing, and improving systems from stone tools and fur garments to 3D printing and computational algorithms. In this mounting series of improvements, significant discoveries and theories have been brought to the fore, which directly oppose themselves with the unalterable qualities found in the doctrines of faith from centuries past. While some say that science and religion answer different questions and need not go to the mat with their intersecting truth claims, the data in this realm are clear about the implications of such conflicts over time.

In an annual poll, Gallup found that over the past three decades, the importance of religion in the lives of individuals has been in decline – from 61% in 1998 to 48% in 2020.¹⁶ This coincides with Pew data from the US in 2019 that shows atheism, or those unconvinced by

¹⁶ Gallup, “Religion” Feb. 11, 2021

claims of scriptures, rising from barely above 2% in 2009 to around 4% in 2018.¹⁷ Furthermore, this coincides with generational passions on the subject, where Generation X was twice as likely as Millennials to identify as Christian.¹⁸

One of the most significant events that began the slow erosion of a Christian basis for Creation came from the observations of Charles Darwin. His proposition that all species of life descended from a common ancestry is foundationally opposed to what The Book of Genesis maps out as our state of the cosmos. Behind his 1859 work *On the Origin of Species* was not a world-rocking change of mind among scores of humanity, but a snowball set into motion. The fight over natural selection and the theory of evolution has been contested on religious grounds and been fought in the United States Supreme Court to decide what we should and shouldn't teach our children about scientific discoveries. For instance, an Instructor Emerita of our sister school UCCS is Susan Epperson of *Epperson v. Arkansas* from 1968. Epperson challenged and won against a statute which made it "unlawful for a teacher in any state supported school or university to teach or to use a textbook that teaches "that mankind ascended or descended from a lower order of animals.""¹⁹ It is certainly significant to note that this case is over a century past the proposition set forth by Darwin.

Beyond the external forces that trigger skepticism of faith, were internal delinquencies laid at the feet of thousands of priests and other members of religious orders. To contextualize the scope of the Catholic Church sexual abuse scandal, a report from 2004 by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice titled "The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States 1950-2002" stated that nearly 11,000 individual

¹⁷ Claire Gecewicz, "Few Americans Say Their House of Worship Is Open, but a Quarter Say Their Faith Has Grown amid Pandemic." *Pew Research Center* Aug. 11, 2020

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Justia Law*, "Epperson v. Arkansas, 393 U.S. 97 (1968)."

allegations were made in the U.S. between 1950-2002 and, “It is impossible to determine from our surveys what percent of all actual cases of abuse that occurred between 1950 and 2002 have been reported to the Church and are therefore in our dataset.”²⁰ That number, as indicated by the study itself, only covers one of dozens of countries where allegations of abuse have surfaced in recent decades. The exuberant and blatant hypocrisy in the teachings and actions of the Church on the subjects of sin, sex, and priest celibacy is the driving motive behind the cases remaining hidden for so long. It is also due to the exclusion of these offenders receiving secular justice and the Church preferring to pay off the victims and offer, “signed confidentiality agreements - or gag orders - as a condition of receiving their settlement payments,” according to the Boston Spotlight team through the Boston Globe, who wrote the book *Betrayal: The Crisis in the Catholic Church*.²¹ They go on further to say that, “In fact, virtually all those who went to the Church with claims of sexual misconduct by priests received settlements before they filed suit, an arrangement that left no public record of the crime committed by the abusing priests. And the confidentiality agreements signed by the victims said the Church could get back its settlement payments if details of the abuse were ever divulged - further protection for abusive priests.”²² The unearthing of this scandal astounded the planet and stained the Catholic Church. The story of the individuals involved, mainly in Boston, compelled me to consider how distant the Church had stood from their own teachings. The way I viewed these mortal men with ungodly acts against them were in reference to the *Supper at Emmaus* painting. The work that was designed to be an attack on the senses had become a template to create a new work that was counter to the

²⁰ *The Nature and Scope of the Problem of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States: A Research Study Conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, the City University of New York.* John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004.

²¹ *Betrayal: The Crisis in the Catholic Church* (Little, Brown and Co., 2002)

²² *Ibid.*, 47.

Counter Reformation, in essence and message. This led to the creation of *Sins of the Fathers*, (fig.4) a large-scale painting which uses Caravaggio's tenebrism and composition to illustrate the moment in time when the Boston Globe Spotlight team released this story to the world. It depicts a handful of priests from Boston in January 2002 who were responsible for sexually abusing hundreds of children for decades. These men – John Geoghan, Paul Shanley, Joseph L. Welsh, Robert Gale, and James Talbot – met various fates. These included assorted amounts of prison time, a sentence to a life of prayer, and being murdered in prison. On the contrary, Cardinal Bernard Law (the central figure) was pressured to resign in December 2002 after documents surfaced of his active involvement in covering up the crimes with hush money and moving abusive priests to different parishes. Law was reassigned to a position in Rome, Italy by Pope John Paul II two years later. The context of these events is rooted in the Church's wealth. Money within the Church allowed events such as these to happen and perpetuates an economy of greed that we see within televangelism today and which is reflected in *My Savior*.



Figure 4. William Dalton Frizzell, *Sins of the Fathers*, acrylic on canvas, 72” x 96”, 2020

To some percentage of the population, these factors and others contribute to the gradual reevaluation of faith in the United States. However, there still remains a percentage of Americans who hold their convictions on faith. In 2018, a survey found that 47% of Americans believe Jesus will definitely or most likely return to Earth within the next 40 years.²³ This kind of belief is why so many are susceptible to fraudulent cons looking to place themselves in a context of faith in order to enrich themselves in the name of God. The merging of broadcast technology and faith – televangelism – is rooted in early radio broadcasts from the 1920s and is continuing in the midst of the current COVID-19 pandemic, making due with restrictions on entering houses of

²³ *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, “U.S. Christians' Views on the Return of Christ.” May 30, 2020.

worship. While not all current forms of virtual worship are rooted in hucksterism, there is a non-trivial amount of fraudulence being openly broadcast for the viewing pleasure of some unsuspecting Christians. Notable names in the televangelist realm include figures like Peter Popoff, Kenneth Copeland, and Jim Bakker. These men have made millions of dollars (and in Bakker’s case, accumulated felony fraud charges in the process) selling products and ideas to a population desperate for the grace of God to come through their television screens and their bank accounts. One tactic employed here is the idea of the prosperity gospel, wherein a patron sends money to the religious organization, and they receive letters back asking for more money and the promises of future wealth through the power of God. In Peter Popoff’s letters, examples of which can be found online, it states that, “**DURING THE NEXT FEW WEEKS**, through the help you receive from this ministry, God will move you toward a **sudden release of money**. In faith I see this influx of money showering down upon you from unexpected sources. I really believe it is somewhere between £1,900 and £19,000. This is serious.”²⁴ The sway that these men have in this realm contributes to the thinking about the COVID-19 pandemic as well. Kenneth Copeland, televangelist from Texas claimed in a March 2020 sermon that the pandemic will be, “over much sooner you think” because, “Christian people all over this country praying have overwhelmed it.” He then blew harshly from his mouth and stated, “COVID-19, I blow the wind of God on you.”²⁵ Bakker, the man who garnered the felony fraud charge for his economic misadventures in the 1980s, attempted to sell “Silver Solution” tinctures alongside an array of other related products in February 2020. On said broadcast, his ‘natural health expert’ Sherrill Sellman declared, "Well, let's say it hasn't been tested on this strain of the coronavirus, but it has been

²⁴ *Good Thinking Society*, “Peter Popoff’s ‘Prosperity Gospel’ Letters in Full.” Apr. 4, 2017.

²⁵ *The Independent*, “Televangelist ‘Blows Wind of God’ at Coronavirus.” Independent Digital News and Media, Apr. 6, 2020.

tested on other strains of the coronavirus and has been able to eliminate it within 12 hours.

Totally eliminates it. Kills it. Deactivates it."²⁶ The FDA intervened within weeks.²⁷

The concerns outlined in the *Ninety-five Theses* Martin Luther penned over five centuries ago did not saturate the Church very deeply in the intervening years. What we can surmise is that the external forces of inquiry and expansion of knowledge in our age helped breach the doors of doubt, and self-inflicted wounds have worked toward breaking them down. This is not to say that people shouldn't be allowed to judge or critique their institutions for any wrongdoings or sins, but when the power of God is leveraged against congregates in order to molest their children and their bank accounts, therein lies a problem of biblical proportion. Perhaps the Church, the most monetarily prosperous and tax-exempt institution in the world has instead learned that money is indeed more essential than the sanctity of God's creatures.

²⁶ Matthew S. Schwartz, *NPR*, "Missouri Sues Televangelist Jim Bakker For Selling Fake Coronavirus Cure." Mar. 11, 2020.

²⁷ *U.S. Food and Drug Administration*, Center for Drug Evaluation and Research. "The Jim Bakker Show - 604820 - 03/06/2020."

Chapter IV

The Art of Blasphemy

The collision of Christianity and art centuries ago has undoubtedly shaped the artworld today. Though the commissioning machinery of the Church has declined in recent centuries, and privately driven individual artistic expression has established artists of various backgrounds and intentions who are motivated by their own experiences, history did not fail to imprint the lasting impact of the symbology, iconography, and ideas of Christianity into the art world. This is also true of many non-Christian cultures who have deeply rich histories of story, myth and legends.

However, the visual expressions passed down through the long entanglement of Christian belief and art are now framed without the consent of the Church. Artists are free to say and think what they will, but the power of the Church still has sway in this arena. It is without question that without the final stamp of approval by Church officials, artists having the final verdict as to their expression doesn't leave the doctrine impenetrable from criticism of the public. There lies a tension in dealing with explicitly religious themes if one is to potentially court controversy – even blasphemy. Again – 2 billion humans on the planet hold certain beliefs very dearly. Perhaps the most recognized work of this era with the image of Christ is Andres Serrano's 1987 photograph *Piss Christ*. So many found the work offensive that the United States Congress cut the National Endowment for the Art's funding by two-fifths, due to their partial funding for the show where *Piss Christ* was shown.²⁸ In a study conducted by Curtis S. Dunkel & Erin E. Hillard in 2014 titled "Blasphemy or Art: What Art Should Be Censored and Who Wants to Censor It?", participants were asked to evaluate 4 artworks. These artworks were accompanied by an initial survey called the *VCA (Views on Controversial Art)*, which had various statements

²⁸ Elizabeth Kastor, *The Washington Post*, "FUNDING ART THAT OFFENDS." WP Company, June 7, 1989.

and an agreement scale rated 0–5 (0 meaning Strongly Disagree and 5 meaning Strongly agree). Some of the statements asked were, “Art that upsets Christians should not be made because it is insensitive to their religion.”, “Everyone must be respected and if that means stopping artists from producing anti-Christian art then so be it.”, and “We should be sensitive to people of other cultures or those who hold different values and therefore even if I am not Christian, I think anti-Christian art should be banned.”. The internal consistency among the participants was 0.91, meaning, “the VCA was positively correlated with the inclusiveness of Christian religious beliefs and the moral foundations of purity and in-group loyalty.” The artworks shown to the participants were as follows: The *Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci, *Autumn Rhythm Number 30* by Jackson Pollock, *Artist’s Shit* by Piero Manzoni, and *Piss Christ* by Andres Serrano. The results of the study found that while there was not much difference in the “Surprise” ascribed to each artwork by the participants but, the “Censorship Metric, Disgust, and Anger” were the highest when looking at *Piss Christ*. The researchers said of the survey, “The cognitive dimension of the divine gives rise to disgust when the sacred and profane are mixed.” While there was a slight heightened disgust for Manzoni’s *Artist’s Shit*, the disgust was elevated further when Serrano’s work placed the sacred image of Christ into a profane space, the vat of urine.

In 2018, at the Contemporary Art Fair in Buenos Aires, art duo Marianela Perelli and Pool Paolini presented *Cake*, (fig. 5), a life sized, red velvet cake covered with fondant in the form of the post-crucifixion Christ. During the exhibition, Argentina’s Minister of Culture, Enrique Avogadro, accepted a piece and ate it at the exhibition. Argentina, the home country of Pope Francis, did not make light of the situation, resulting in demands on social media that the Minister should resign with one commenter saying, “As A Catholic I am deeply offended: I demand that you apologize publicly. This is nefarious. It’s blasphemy.” Avogadro responded by

stating that “As a person, I have a very clear opinion in favor of freedom of expression, particularly when it’s related to issues that question us, that make us reflect or that oppose our own convictions... I also believe that the place of art is precisely to make us uncomfortable and to shake us.”²⁹



Figure 5. Image of *Cake*, artist Emiliano Paolini (left) and Minister of Culture Enrique Avogrado (third from the right) Image courtesy of Newsweek

Leon Ferrari, a fellow Argentinian created a piece in 2004 featuring Christ crucified on a U.S. fighter jet entitled *La Civilización Occidental y Cristiana*” (*Western Christian Civilization*) which caused Jorge Mario Bergoglio (now Pope Francis) to call for the show to be closed. A

²⁹ Shane Croucher, *Newsweek*, “A Life-Sized Jesus Cake with Stigmata Wounds Is Making Christians Angry.” *Newsweek*, May 29, 2018.

lawsuit of the incident deemed that the work be taken down, but an appeal was made, and the decision was overruled, but not before some of the work had been destroyed by protestors.

For the last three decades, satirical Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan has played with subverting audience expectations. In *La Nona Ora (The Ninth Hour)* from 1999, Cattelan depicts a photorealistic sculpture of Pope John Paul II drenched in agony after being struck by a meteorite. If an event were to occur, is that a judgement or sign from God? Or that nobody, not even the Pope is safe from chance? Melanie Holcomb, curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art said of the work, “It’s an ambiguous work to be sure, harboring elements of humor, cruelty, and irreverence, but one can also read it as paying tribute to the power of forces and institutions larger than ourselves. There is of course the awesome power of the meteor, but I’m also struck by how the Pope and the cross he carries have survived undamaged. His face remains serene, his torso is square and the cross, unbent. In the medieval world, a miraculously preserved body was a sure indicator of saintliness.”³⁰ Cattelan’s work dares the viewer to trample through obscurity on all fronts. Even the most seminal works of Christian art, the Sistine Chapel in particular, is not free from Cattelan’s interpretation. Looking at Michelangelo’s supposed magnum opus, fellow Italian Cattelan created a 1/5 scale replica, authentic frescos and all. By literally diminishing the work. The title of the piece also questions the status bestowed upon the room – *Untitled*.

While one person’s humor is another’s blasphemy, the implication of altering the imagery of Christendom is nearly guaranteed to cause a rift in the hearts of many. The Argentinian minister is indeed correct in stating that freedom of expression is imperative when we encounter ideas that oppose our own convictions. The works that could be seen as offensive are positioned in a Venn diagram with relationships between the sacred, the profane, humor, and

³⁰ Scott Indrisek, *Artsy*, “Revisiting Maurizio Cattelan's Sculpture of the Pope Struck by a Meteorite.” Apr. 26, 2019.

blasphemy. As artworks are able to manifest these qualities to pronounce themselves as physical ideas that garner visceral and emotional reactions, it may be wise to understand how to manipulate these interlaced concepts in order to blur the margins of the viewer's assessment of the work. Taking this into consideration, *My Savior* was designed to make the viewer potentially second guess their assessment of the object before them. Placing itself somewhere between opportunist gimmick, faithful representation, and a tool for somebody attending church at home during the pandemic. *My Savior* looks for the viewer to question what they believe the difference is between blasphemy and reverence.

Chapter V

My Savior

Beginning in the fall of 2018, I had a conversation with a loved one about why they held such high regard for believing in salvation in heaven following death. After pressing for longer than was necessary, I was firmly told that “It’s comforting!” The irreconcilable juxtaposition between the morbid crucifixion of Christ and the comfort produced by it is best illustrated among Christian websites and blogs, “One of the greatest joys of being a Christian is the knowledge that even though we are imperfect, our sins have been washed away forever by the blood of Jesus Christ and we have been pardoned by God.”³¹ Notions such as this have stuck with me since I received the *New Believers* book as an anonymous gift in 2012. Having spent my childhood attached to various stuffed animals – my favorite being a red dog called Rover – I was reminded of how much I relied on this object to help me escape any fear or distress. Pinned to my studio wall after that conversation was a sketch of a Christ plush toy. Unlike the ones you can find online with exaggerated cartoonish proportions and child-friendly smiling faces, this plush would mirror the body of Christ as shown in Diego Velázquez’s *Christ Crucified* – bloody and somber (*fig.6*). This conventional appearance of Christ was represented in every church I had attended and Easter Sunday crucifixion reenactment I witnessed.

³¹ *CompellingTruth.org*, “What Does It Mean That Our Sins Are Washed Away?”

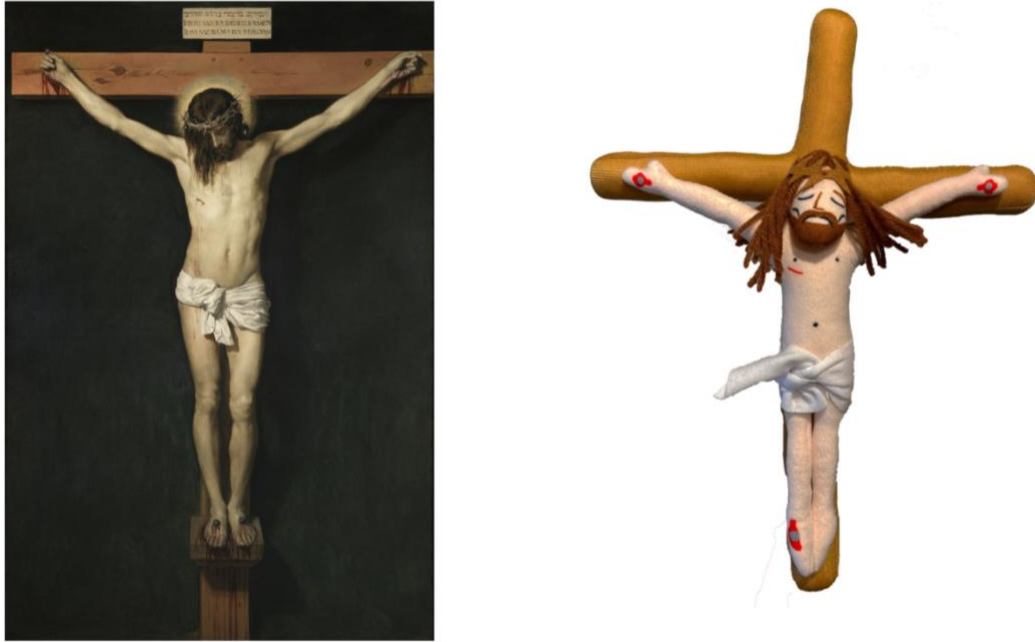


Figure 6. Side by side comparison of *Christ Crucified* by Diego Velázquez and *My Savior*.

This project, like many others I've made in graduate school, have taken a long time to create. Many instances of creating work either take a considerable amount of physical labor or a considerable amount of searching to find the right materials, services, or companies to aid the process of creation. In this case, a handful of custom plush companies denied the request to create such an image of Christ as they do not dare venture into religious imagery. After months of searching, one company finally said they would be happy to help make such a rendition. The initial idea was to create an object as a symbolic gesture of comfort. However, as years of rumination allowed this idea to mature, it occurred to me that this plush might not be situated in an overtly offensive territory such as *Piss Christ*. While the sacred image of Christ was being utilized in the work, there was no blatant desecration inherent in the fabric form, it felt as though it could be read as an homage to Christ.

As final design choices were being settled with the manufacturers of the plush, the COVID-19 virus began to wreak havoc across the globe. As the implications of the novel virus began to descend into every corner of the globe, everyday life felt as though it had entered a new phase of reality. The Earth kept spinning, but everything felt as though it came to a standstill. As infection rates and death tolls became omnipresent background noise, I had seen a story about televangelist Jim Bakker attempting to sell Silver Solution – a miracle liquid for many ailments. The blatant opportunism integrated with an even more apparent lie had perturbed my perception of the lengths people would go to make monetary gain. I began to view *My Savior* as a potential to echo the business model a real product with branding, advertising and a space to fill in a market – all reflective of what this televangelist had been doing as the virus kept spreading. As the design choices for *My Savior* the company was completed, it became paramount that it would not promote a false miracle for the viewer or potential patron. Silver Solution and Miracle Spring Water – the latter being the brainchild of televangelist Peter Popoff – were products that had been advertised in video form, attempting to compel viewers that these products were necessary to guarantee future fortunes, cure cancers, and cure coronaviruses.³² Both of which could only appear true if the viewer of said advertisement held beliefs which might make these men of God appear righteous rather than fraudulent. Though not every Christian who sees these products would succumb to the promises espoused by the televangelists promises, there have been enough to grow small fortunes for both Bakker and Popoff throughout their careers.

Amid the news reports of televangelist miracle products and death tolls in various countries, there were also reports of the effects that the virus had on communities of faith. By

³² *The Christian Post*, “Peter Popoff’s Miracle Spring Water Show Banned in UK, Gov’t Cracks down on Its Cancer-Curing Claims.”

July 2020, nearly forty churches were noted as having nearly 650 cases of coronavirus, with many congregates arguing in favor of protections for their right to worship.³³ One such death was that of a pastor who espoused, “This coronavirus may be a privilege, because I’ll tell you right now, there’s a much bigger judgment coming. It’s in the Bible.” This same pastor claimed a linkage between the virus and the sins of fornication while he appeared on the Jim Bakker show on March 25th, 2020. He died from the virus on November 3rd, 2020.³⁴

The spreading of the virus within places of worship caused many churches across the globe to move their services into the virtual sphere. According to a Pew Research Poll, 82% of Americans who attended church monthly have attended church online and due to the pandemic, 4% of those Americans say their faith has strengthened because of it.³⁵ *My Savior* is designed as a real plush product that claims to be nothing more than a reminder of Christ’s sacrifice. A large inspiration was drawn from a product that read both as parody and object of desire: Trumpy Bear. Trumpy was a teddy bear with golden hair that debuted in 2017 to commemorate the then President of the United states. Trumpy Bear embodies a polarizing mystique, with die-hard fans and vocal adversaries – not unlike the man himself. Early on, the product was thought to only be a parody video rather than a real product for purchase, but this was not the case. According to the manufacturers, due to the hatred that the man and the teddy bear conjure, they’ve received at least ten credible threats which invoked law enforcement intervention.³⁶ Perhaps not so coincidentally, Mike Lindell, creator of the My Pillow – whose name gave inspiration for *My*

³³ Kate Conger, *The New York Times*, “Churches Were Eager to Reopen. Now They Are Confronting Coronavirus Cases.” *The New York Times*, July 8, 2020.

³⁴ Jessica Schladebeck, *Nydailynews.com*, “Texas Pastor Who Hailed Coronavirus as 'Privilege' and 'Wake-up Call' for Fornicators Dies from Disease.” *New York Daily News*, Nov. 6, 2020.

³⁵ Claire Gecewicz, *Pew Research Center*, “Few Americans Say Their House of Worship Is Open, but a Quarter Say Their Faith Has Grown amid Pandemic.” *Pew Research Center*, Aug. 11, 2020.

³⁶ Lisette Voytko, *Forbes*, “Trumpy Bear Distributor Says They've Received Hundreds of Threats-Including Death Threats.” *Forbes Magazine*, Aug. 12, 2020.

Savior, is an avid supporter of Donald Trump and an advocate for evangelical Christianity. He also appeared on the Jim Bakker Show in April 2020.³⁷



Figure 6. Still from the My Savior Infomercial

The branding and direction of *My Savior* had to be clear in symbolic imagery so that it fit within a believable aesthetic of the modern Christian canon. When looking at logos online, one clearly sees simple iconography and simple color schemes. For *My Savior*, heavenly rays of golden yellow light pierce through clouds with sky blues and golden letters. The “Y” in *My Savior* is represented by the body of Christ himself. The counter (a technical term for the partially or fully enclosed shape of a letter) for the letter ‘O’ in Savior, is in the shape of a heart, referencing the love Christ displayed by His sacrifice (*fig. 6*). The logo aims to appeal to both

³⁷ *The Jim Bakker Show*, “Taking A Stand for Christ (Day 1) Pastor Jim and Lori Welcome Special Guest Mike Lindell as They Talk about Taking a Stand for Christ. Guests: Mike Lindell.”

adults and children, as *My Savior* is a plush for anybody over the age of three, as stipulated by the consumer safety tag stitched into the plush. For the tone and direction of the infomercial, it was necessary to imply much of the same tone that was advocated for by many Christian interpretations of the virus, that the year 2020 was a sign of Revelation and Rapture. However, as this message was invoked in many articles during the early months of the pandemic, it was not outlandish to consider that adding that message to the video was essential. Constructing the video voice-over and testimonial actors became the most important aspect of *My Savior*. Down to the cross necklaces worn by each actor, there had to be an air on believability which could be easily accessible to a Christian community viewing the product. (fig. 7)



Figure 7. Stills from the My Savior Infomercial

Perhaps more than any other project I have worked on; I am deeply intrigued with what the response will be. Of course, the long-term life of *My Savior* is to purchase advertising space in the real world as a way to breach a space wider than the typical art-centric communities I am around. After watching, researching, reading and interacting with people of faith for years, there is an unfathomable amount of speculation I have about the reaction this will have for viewers.

One thing is certain, I will be surprised with any outcome that occurs. In the lifespan of the work,

whatever it may be, there will be no shortage of individual interpretations by the faithful and their counterparts: both good and bad. Varying Christian denominations may scoff at the idea of a cuddly Christ, while others may see it as a useful tool to introduce children about the sacrifice. There is no way to know without letting the work live in the wilds of the information superhighway. Within the form of the plush, the branding, and the video, *My Savior* is distorting the lines between what is sacred, profane, humorous, and blasphemous.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

From my earliest encounters with Christianity, I understood that the story of Jesus Christ was one doused in suffering, ecstasy, and a promise of eternity after death. These concepts were tacitly present throughout my developing years in Colorado Springs and loomed as abstractions transfixed onto the reality we inhabit. I spent much of my time ingesting this without too much consideration or investigation until it was outlined to me in the *New Believers* book. It was the final sentence of the note that accompanied this gift which has fueled my desire to understand these concepts further, “Use the index if you are unfamiliar with God’s plan of salvation.”

My pursuit of becoming an artist was developed around images of Creation, illuminated by artists who altered the course of history within the dictation of the Church. The more I began to follow my impulses as an artist, the more salvation emerged from behind the shroud of mystery into something I could understand the yearning for. Perhaps even now, as both grandparents that I grew up close with have died in the course of creating this project – both of whom were Christians who may have expected eternal life in heaven with God – I still try to evaluate the circumstances of their passing in terms of their beliefs and my lack thereof. Death has, is, and will continue to impact and perplex every single one of us as it takes the people we love most in this world. It is not judgement that I aim to pass amongst those who believe in such a thing as salvation through Christ. I, like countless others before me wonder if there is a purpose ascribed to this existence, or if such a question merits serious consideration in the first place. *My Savior* is a near decade long dialogue with an anonymous gift received by “Somebody who cares, a lot.”

Throughout the making my work, I often visited Christian blogs on Christian websites to get an unfiltered representation of the mind of a true believer. This sort of research operates on a different plane. It encompasses a genuine interpretation of the doctrine and puts it in the ether for anyone to read. Perhaps the most illuminating excerpt I found is from Lifeway.com, written by a mother of three: "We're all born into sin. Evil isn't what we do; it's who we are. Romans 3:10 confirms, "There is no one righteous, not even one." The cost of faith is so high, none of us could pay it, not with a lifetime of good works. But there's good news. Romans 5:8 declares, "God proves His own love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us!" John 3:16 echoes, "For God loved the world in this way: He gave His One and Only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life." The true cost of salvation is found in the blood of Christ."³⁸

³⁸ *Salvation Has a Price*, Lifeway. www.lifeway.com/en/articles/homelife-salvation-has-a-price.

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